

TAI CHI Illustrated

For greater balance, relaxation, and health



Master Pixiang Qiu • Weimo Zhu

TAI CHI

illustrated

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*To our wives, Guilin Xu and Enyi Cai,
and our families for their love and support always*

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Preface

Tai chi, a Chinese mind–body exercise, was developed as a form of martial arts in China around the 12th century AD. It is an exercise based on the Chinese Tao philosophy of yin–yang balance, the only such exercise in the world. In fact, all its movements and applications reflect Tao philosophy. Over time, people began to use tai chi mainly for health purposes; now millions of people worldwide practice it regularly. Tai chi practitioners move their bodies in a slow, relaxed, and graceful manner through a series. Tai chi has been proven to have beneficial effects with respect to balance, fall prevention, and nonvertebral fractures, as well as many chronic diseases. In the 1990s, the Western research community started to examine the effectiveness of tai chi interventions using scientific research methods and standardized outcome measures. Tai chi is quickly becoming one of the most popular mind–body exercises in the West.

In *Tai Chi Illustrated*, key stances, foot patterns, and single forms are depicted with the use of more than 15 color illustrations so that beginners can learn tai chi easily. By combining forms, two routines (one with six forms and another with twelve forms) are presented and illustrated. Finally, basics and key movements of push hands, in which two people practice tai chi movements in a manner similar to its origins in martial arts, are introduced and illustrated.

Tai Chi Illustrated is organized into five parts. Part I includes five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive introduction to tai chi, including its history, unique movement features, relationships with the philosophy of Chinese Tao and Chinese medicine, various styles and schools of tai chi, and known health benefits. Chapter 2 covers basic posture, chapter 3 presents basic foot movements, chapter 4 covers basic hand forms and movement, and chapter 5 describes basic stances. Part II consists of four chapters. Chapter 6 introduces three forms for cardiovascular health, chapter 7 introduces three forms for stress relief and low-back health, chapter 8 introduces two forms for balance, and chapter 9 introduces two forms for coordination. Part III consists of the three remaining chapters. Chapter 10 introduces a six-form routine, chapter 11 introduces a twelve-form routine, and chapter 12 presents several push hands routines.

The primary audience for this book is anyone interested in mind–body exercises, such as tai chi and yoga. It is especially aimed at beginning to intermediate tai chi practitioners but should also be useful to people interested in exploring holistic health activities, including physical educators, personal trainers, and physical therapists, along with those seeking alternative and complementary treatments for chronic health conditions such as heart disease and depression.

Read the book, learn tai chi, improve your health, and enjoy life!

Acknowledgments

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part I

Tai Chi Basics

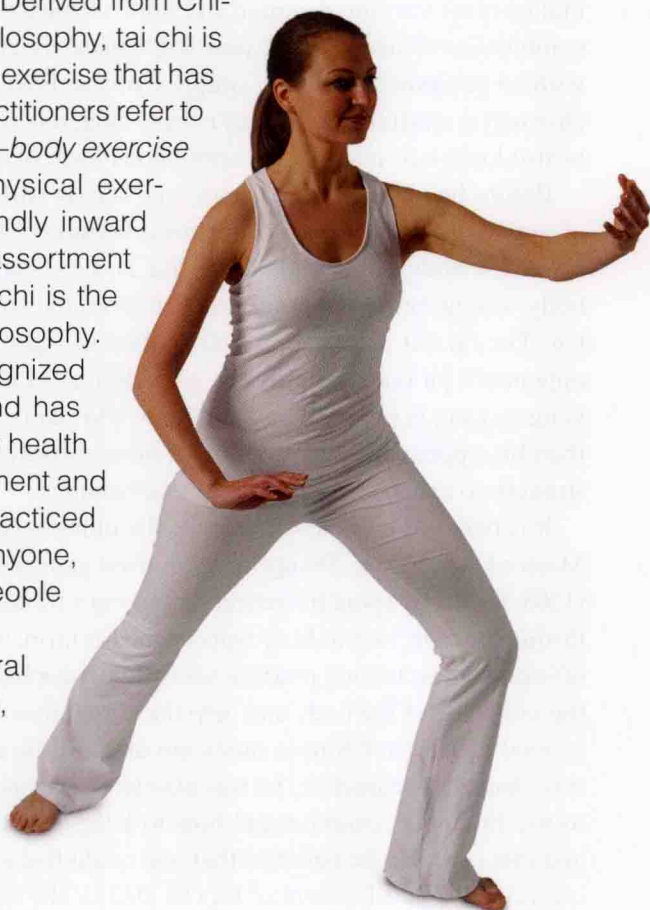
Chapter 1, which provides a comprehensive introduction to tai chi, includes the history of tai chi, its unique features, and its relationship with Chinese Tao philosophy and traditional Chinese medicine. Various styles and schools of tai chi, as well as known health benefits, are also introduced. Chapters 2 to 5 detail basic tai chi movements. Chapter 2 introduces basic postures of tai chi, chapter 3 teaches basic foot movements, chapter 4 covers basic hand forms and movements, and chapter 5 introduces basic stances of tai chi.

chapter 1

Art and Practice of Tai Chi

Tai chi, or more correctly tai chi quan (or tai ji quan using the Chinese spelling system), is a Chinese mind-body exercise that is rapidly becoming popular in the United States. Derived from Chinese martial arts and Tao philosophy, tai chi is a unique Chinese mind-body exercise that has centuries of history. Some practitioners refer to it as *moving meditation*. *Mind-body exercise* is typically defined as a physical exercise executed with a profoundly inward focus. Although there is an assortment of mind-body exercises, tai chi is the only one that itself is a philosophy. More important, it is a recognized part of Chinese medicine and has been proven to provide many health benefits. It requires no equipment and little space, and it can be practiced anytime, anywhere, and by anyone, including older adults and people with chronic diseases.

Because of its rich cultural history, philosophical foundation, and accessibility to almost everyone, tai chi is becoming one of the most popular forms of exercise not only in China but around the world.



People in more than 150 countries practice tai chi. It is estimated that more than 2.5 billion people practice tai chi regularly, making it the most popular Chinese mind–body exercise. In some countries, such as Japan, tai chi is already as popular as it is in China, and many practitioners in those countries have reached high skill levels.

Tai chi has become an important vehicle for introducing and promoting Chinese culture around the world. In 2006, Tai chi was selected to be part of the first group in China’s national intangible cultural heritage (ICH), a system for protecting cultural identities and therefore the cultural diversity of humankind. The Chinese government applied to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for tai chi to be part of UNESCO’s ICH in 2009.

What Is Tai Chi Quan?

Tai chi quan (pronounced “tai-chi-chwon”) is a form of Chinese boxing based on tai chi philosophy. *Quan* means “fist” in Chinese. In martial arts, it refers to various forms of boxing, and each form has its own offensive and defensive fighting style that involves varying dynamic and static elements, from moving back and forth to a combination of firm and soft moves. Quan can be considered a martial art performed without equipment, or more simply Chinese boxing. Because the movement in tai chi quan is similar to a moving river—long, relaxed, and continuous—tai chi quan is also known as a long, soft, continuous form of Chinese boxing.

Before beginning tai chi quan, one stands still and the body enters into a state of *wuji* (e.g., body weight is balanced between both legs). As soon as the practice starts, the body enters into tai chi, that is, a constant exchange of yin and yang, with body weight being constantly moved from the firm (yang) leg to the empty (yin) leg. The tai chi principle is also applied to fighting using tai chi quan. When an opponent’s hit (yang) is coming, a tai chi master never directly fights back because yang to yang is not balanced and he would likely get hurt even if he were stronger than his opponent. Rather, a tai chi master always tries to use his opponent’s own strength to cause the opponent to lose balance.

It is believed that the Chen style, the oldest style of tai chi quan, was created by Master Chen (Chen, Wangting), a retired general at the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). He spent his retirement living a tranquil life in the country. During the farming season, he was busy working on his farm, but he practiced boxing during the off-season. His boxing practice was initially for health purposes in order to regulate the yin–yang of the body and help the circulation of Qi and blood. (*Qi* or *chi* refers to vital energy in Chinese medicine and will be explained in more detail later in this chapter.) Meanwhile, he was also teaching his children and grandchildren how to use boxing as exercise and how to keep a balanced diet. Through his exercise and diet practice, he believed that one could live a peaceful, healthy, and harmonious life. The development of tai chi, that is, the modification of a martial art from

use on the battlefield to an exercise for well-being, reflected the general's desire to return to nature and to live a life that reflected harmony between man and nature.

The Chen style of tai chi quan is full of tai chi principles (i.e., yin–yang contrasts and interconnections). For example, the mind should be at peace while the body is actively moving during tai chi practice, there is a constant change between firmness and looseness in the continual transfer of weight from one leg to the other and the opening and closing of the arms while coordinating movements with inhaling and exhaling, and the end of a movement flows smoothly into the beginning of another movement. Recognizing the movements' unique connection with tai chi philosophy, Master Wang (Wang, Zongyue), a well-known martial arts master at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) who also was well versed in philosophy, studied tai chi and provided an excellent summary of tai chi quan in his book *Tai Chi Quan Theory* (translated also as the *Tai Chi Treatise*), which remains popular today. From then on, *tai chi quan* or simply *tai chi* became the official name of this exercise form. Because many movements in tai chi are based on tai chi philosophy, many people believe that practicing tai chi regularly will help them achieve balance or harmony with nature.

Characteristics of Tai Chi Movements

Tai chi is an exercise with four distinct movement characteristics:

1. *Movements are soft and continuous.* Movements mimic a slow-moving river.
2. *Movements are calm and quiet.* While doing tai chi, you pursue a sense of being of calmness. Again, similar to a slow-moving river, often you do not feel the movement but rather the calmness. This sensation is especially true in your mind. The Chinese believe that if you relax your mind, your qi will become calm and quiet. Even while moving, every piece of the movement is felt as if you were static—the movement begins smoothly and slowly progresses through a succession of thousands of static poses.
3. *Movements are relaxed.* The principle of being relaxed applies to all movements. To relax, you must relax the whole body and move in a natural way. Do not use any extraneous strength or energy. Again, you must have a relaxed mind to have a relaxed body. Mental peace is important because it is often associated with your outlook and attitude toward life.
4. *Movements are circular.* The movements in tai chi are rarely straightforward or angular, and this is especially true for the arm movements. Instead, tai chi movements follow paths of circles or curves. Tai chi masters often say that all tai chi movements can be summarized by circles, which fits perfectly within the general concept of tai chi philosophy, as we'll learn later in this book—the movements create patterns of repeated circles.

Tai Chi and Traditional Chinese Medicine Theories

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is well known for many of its practices, such as herbs and acupuncture, and many of its theories, including yin–yang, five elements, qi or vital energy, and blood, meridians, and internal organs as a system. The foundation of TCM is aligned with tai chi theory. People are considered as a whole and their balance (yin and yang) are key elements in TCM diagnosis and treatment. In addition, TCM believes that health is directly related to one’s qi level (the higher, the better) and circulation along the meridian system (the more qi movement, the better). Although there are still many unanswered questions concerning the meridian system, it has been proven to have a relationship with health. Fostering qi, promoting qi and blood circulation, and dredging the meridians have always been the focus of TCM treatments.

Tai chi breathing routines and many of its movements are associated with TCM. For example, transferring weight from one leg to another during tai chi practice is directly related to the change from yang to yin and vice versa. In line with “Exercise is medicine,” a slogan of the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), one may say that “Tai chi is Chinese medicine.”

Yin and Yang

Tai chi (see figure 1.1 for the Chinese characters) is a concept in Chinese philosophy that has had a great influence on Chinese culture. Its name abounds with meaning. It is believed that the earliest appearance of tai chi was in the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, a well-known Chinese philosophy book written in the third century BC. The tai chi characters in Chinese represent the Tao philosophy, or Taoism, which believes that, although the world is full of contrasts or conflicts, it can reach harmony by balancing those contrasts or conflicts.

According to the Tao, the contrasts or conflicts in nature can be best summarized using the yin and yang concepts. The direct meanings of yin and yang in Chinese are the bright side and the dark side of an object. Note that the concepts of *bright*

and *dark* do not have the Western cultural connotation of *good* and *bad* in Tao philosophy. The Tao philosophy uses yin and yang to represent a wide range of opposite properties in the universe: cold and hot, slow and fast, still and moving, masculine and feminine, lower and upper, and so on. In general, the characteristics of stillness, descent, darkness, erosion, slowness, and



Figure 1.1 Chinese characters for *tai chi*.

organic diseases pertain to yin, and in contrast, movement, ascent, brightness, growth, energy, and functional diseases pertain to yang. Yin and yang are opposites yet complementary; they do not exist independently of each other but rather are able to change, or morph, into each other. For example, day (yang) turns into night (yin) and winter (yin) turns into spring (yang). The internal forces or rules of nature lead to the harmony of yin and yang and are the Tao, or way. In the *Book of Changes*, tai chi or Tao is the integration of yin and yang, the contrary forces interconnected and interdependent in nature.

In TCM, health is represented as a balance of yin and yang, although the balance of yin and yang in a healthy body is not always perfect. Under normal circumstances, the yin and yang balance in the body is in a state of constant change based on both the external and internal environment. For example, while exercising, a person's body is more energized and has greater yang, and once exercising stops and a quiet, peaceful state is entered, yin dominates. Illness is caused by an imbalance of yin and yang in the body. The treatment of illness in TCM therefore is the process of rebalancing yin and yang in the body. This is done through the use of acupuncture, herbal remedies, exercise, diet, and lifestyle changes (e.g., smoking cessation). As balance is restored in the body, so is health restored. Balance in TCM includes balance in both physical and mental health.

The character *tai* in Chinese derives from the character *dai*, meaning “big.” To represent something that is much larger than just being big, the ancient Chinese added a stroke inside the *dai* character to create the *tai* character. Thus, *tai* refers to the largest or most supreme (see figure 1.2 for a comparison of the characters). The character *chi*, as shown in figure 1.3, originally referred to the highest section, or peak, of a roof. Placing both of these Chinese characters together into *tai chi* (see figure 1.1) synergizes their meanings into a new meaning that refers to the universe or something that is immense.

According to medical science, diseases can be classified into two general groups: organic and functional. Organic diseases are those in which an actual destruction of bodily tissue has occurred (e.g., blood diseases, cancer, tuberculosis), whereas functional diseases are caused by temporary disturbances of function and there is no actual loss or structural alteration of tissue (e.g., arthritis, balance disorder, dementia).

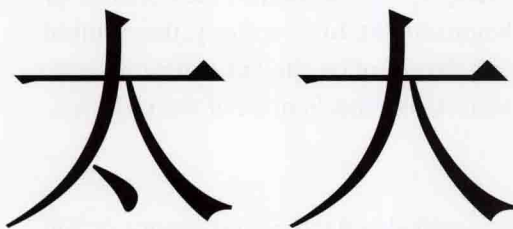


Figure 1.2 Chinese characters for *tai* and *dai*.



Figure 1.3 Chinese character for *chi*.

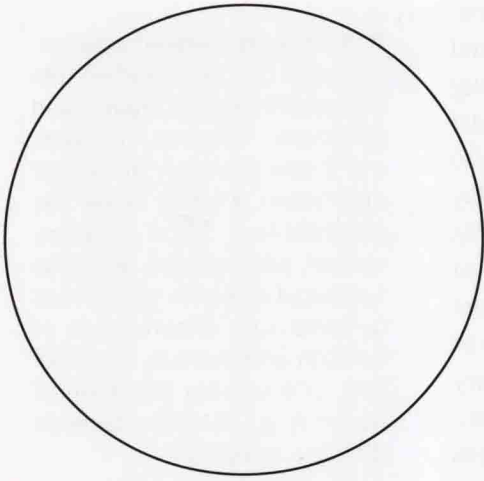


Figure 1.4 Wuji diagram.

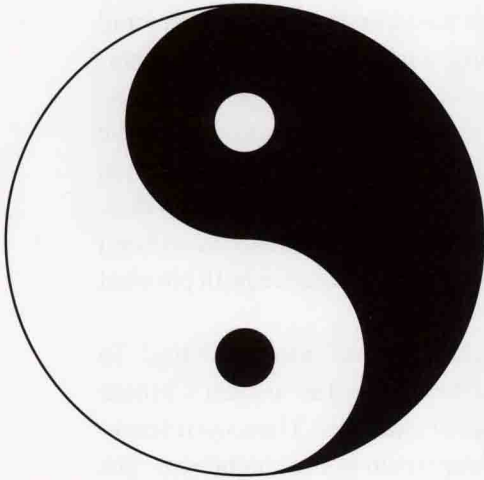


Figure 1.5 Yin and yang diagram.

It is believed that Tuan Chen (872-989 AD), a Taoist during the end of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-960 AD) and at the beginning of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 AD), created the earliest wuji diagram, which is simply a circle (see figure 1.4). The circle represents the original status of the universe in which everything was static. Later, Dunyi Zhou (1017-1073 AD), a philosopher during the Northern Song Dynasty, published a short, well-known article called “Tai Chi Diagram,” in which the tai chi concept was further described and extended. Basically, the ancient Chinese believed that the universe was originally a static entity without yin or yang. Later, the yang element came into existence through some mysterious and dynamic movement of qi, or vital energy. The end or extreme of the yang dynamic movement is stillness, which produced yin. Life and the world were then created as a result of the movement and exchange of yin and yang.

Wuji does not include the yin and yang concept, yet tai chi can be considered a special form of wuji, one that includes the balancing of yin and yang. Zhou’s descriptions of tai chi can be better represented by the yin and yang diagram (see figure 1.5). In the diagram, yin and yang are symbolized by a circle consisting of two semicircular teardrops, a white one representing

yang (sun, male, fire, and so on) and a black one representing yin (moon, female, water, and so on). The black spot inside the white teardrop and the white spot inside the black teardrop symbolize that yin and yang are not absolutes; they change or morph into each other (e.g., the end of day begins night). In its entirety, this symbol of yin and yang also represents the balance and change of tai chi within the universe, nature, and even society. Tai chi therefore reflects the mechanism of the universe.

Qi and the Meridians

Qi (pronounced “chi”) in Chinese medicine is considered to be vital energy, or life force. Although its existence has not been completely confirmed by modern science, it is generally believed that qi circulates along the body’s meridians, whose existence

has been confirmed by modern biophysics (Chen, 2004). A meridian, according to TCM, is a path through which the life energy known as qi is believed to flow. There are 20 meridians in the body, including 12 regular channels or meridians and 8 extraordinary channels or meridians. The 12 regular meridians each correspond to an internal organ, nourishing the organ and extending to an extremity (see figure 1.6). There are 649 acupuncture points on the meridians. Meridians are also divided into yin and yang groups. For example, the yin meridians of the arm are Lung, Heart, and Pericardium meridians, and the yang meridians of the arm are the Large Intestine, Small Intestine, and Triple Heater.

The smooth circulation of qi within the meridians helps maintain health. Qi and the meridians can benefit from tai chi practice because tai chi emphasizes relaxation of the mind during practice, which in turn aids the circulation of qi. In addition, it is believed that the relaxed manner of tai chi movements improves the ability of the meridians to nourish organs and tissues. Finally, tai chi movement, such as waist rotation and limb flexion and extension, could function as a kind of self-massage, which should stimulate qi and strengthen the physiological function of tissues and organs.

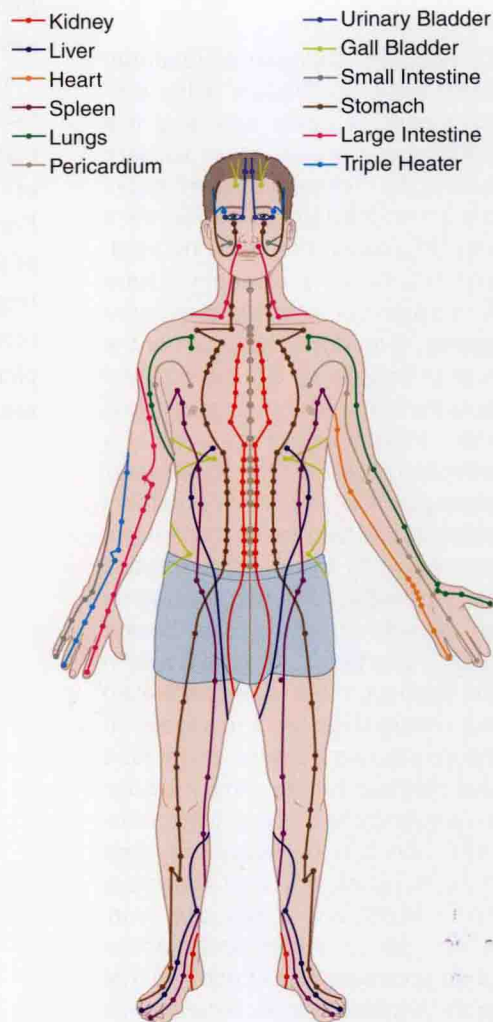


Figure 1.6 Twelve regular meridians in the body.

Although there is still a long way to go to understand how meridians work, more and more scientific evidence is being accumulated to support its existence and role in maintaining health. As an example, there is growing interest in acupuncture, which is based on the meridians. It is believed that medical effectiveness, cost effectiveness, and credibility provided by clinical trials and physiological research are the key reasons for the growing interest in acupuncture (Stux & Hammerschlag, 2001).