

The Hun Yuan T'ai Chi System

By J. Justin Meehan

When I first studied with Feng Zhiqiang in 1981, it was for the express purpose of studying the original Chen style of Taiji (T'ai Chi Ch'uan) as taught by Chen Fake. At that time, Feng had just retired from his job working in a factory and he was teaching strictly Chen style.

Sometime in the 1990s, he changed the name of what he was teaching from Chen Style Taijiquan to "Chen Style Xinyi Hun Yuan Taiji." People rightly wanted to know whether this name change indicated that Feng was now teaching something other than strictly Chen style Taiji.

I returned to study with him again in Finland this past August, 2000. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet this great man again and to compare his Hun Yuan system of Taiji with the more traditional Chen form of Chen Fake, which I had studied with Feng some 20 years earlier in Beijing.

In the 20 years between my studies with Feng, I had continued my studies with Zhang Xue Xin of San Francisco, one of Feng's leading U.S. disciples.

Although I have been studying with Zhang since 1991 and am one of the regional directors of the Hun Yuan Taiji Association of the U.S., under Zhang, I am writing this article as an individual and not as a representative of Zhang or Feng.

The opinions expressed herein are only my own personal opinions, based upon my own observations and an interview with Feng, himself.

Perhaps the one of the biggest question regarding the Hun Yuan system are whether Feng teaches the Chen style of the Chen village or something else. Even more fundamental is whether he teaches strictly Taiji as we have known and expect it to be.

Before answering these questions, we need to understand that although

J. Justin Meehan teaches in St. Louis, MO, and is a long-time student of Feng Zhiqiang's system.



Feng Zhiqiang demonstrates an application with Harrison Moretz, Seattle, WA. Observing is Bob Schlagel, Boone, NC.

Feng studied with the world renowned 17th generation Chen family patriarch of Taiji, Chen Fake, this was not his only teacher; only his most famous teacher. Feng studied with Chen Fake (1887-1957) for approximately 7 years, from 1950 until 1957 when Chen Fake died at the age of 70.

Feng studied Xinyi and qigong even longer from Hu Yaozhen (1879-1973). He began studying with Hu when he was 20 (about 1948). Hu Yaozhen did not die until 1973, at the age of 93. Feng has stated that he studied with Hu for 9 years.

Hu Yaozhen and Chen Fake were friends and it was Hu Yaozhen who introduced Feng to Chen Fake and encouraged him to study with him. In 1953, when Chen was the president of the Beijing Martial Arts Research Association, Hu was vice president.

In other words, it can be said that they taught together in the same martial arts school, where Feng was studying under both teachers, as well as assisting them in their classes.

It was also at this time that Feng began training with another famous Chen stylist, Chen Fake's son, Chen

Feng Zhiqiang

Most readers have heard of the legendary Feng Zhiqiang in this magazine and elsewhere.

For those who are not familiar with Feng Zhiqiang, he has been named by the Chinese Government as one of the 13 most outstanding living masters of Taijiquan, along with such other luminaries as Chen Xiaowang (Chen style), Yang Zhenduo (Yang style) and Wang Peisheng (Wu style).

It is Feng's ability to apply Taijiquan techniques, especially his push hands ability, which initially brought him such great acclaim.

Feng Zhiqiang was considered by many as one of Chen Fake's most brilliant and accomplished students.

Although Feng has authored many books on Taijiquan and qigong, as well as videos, these were mostly produced in China and Japan and were not readily available

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Zhaokui, with whom he became training partners and friends. Chen Zhaokui always spoke of Feng with the highest regard for both his intelligence and ability, and referred to Feng as his "older brother."

The Hun Yuan system includes both Chen style and Xinyi. Feng's system is actually called "Chen Style Xinyi Hun Yuan Taijiquan." The Xinyiquan that Hu taught Feng, which was called Xinyi Liuhe Quan, included standing postures, Five Elements practice, 12 Animals, and lots of qigong.

The term "Liu He" refers to the principle of the "Six Harmonies," which is an important aspect of Feng's system. It refers to the importance of externally aligning:

1. The shoulders with the hips;
2. The elbows with the knees; and
3. The hands with the feet.

This contributes to greater body unification and for proper qi circulation.

Internally, it refers to the importance of unifying:

1. The emotional ("heart") mind and the will or intention;
2. The mental intention and the qi; and
3. The qi with the power.

Besides being a master of Xinyi,



Feng Zhiqiang demonstrates the beginning of a new 48-form movement.

Hu was also skilled in both Taiji and Bagua. He was known as "One Finger Hu" for his ability to defeat an opponent with the use of only one finger. It is said that he could defeat an opponent with only a look.

In addition to martial skills, Hu was also skilled in Chinese medicine, qigong, and he was the author of several books on qigong and health, including the "Five Animal Frolics." No wonder that Feng has named his system in such a way as to include recognition of Hu Yaozhen, who, although not as well known as Chen Fake, was, nevertheless, such an important influ-

On the external level there are important differences in the way that Hun Yuan style movements are performed. There are a lot of overlapping "lead in" circles performed prior to the execution of individual movements.

ence on Feng and the development of Hun Yuan Taiji.

The big question is whether what Feng is teaching today is, in fact, traditional Chen style Taiji or some new style combining Taiji with Xinyi, as in the Sun style of Taiji.

In my opinion, Hun Yuan Taiji is not traditional Taiji as is taught by the representatives of the Chen family and village. It certainly includes Chen style Taiji, but it is not limited to Chen traditional format and form.

Anyone seeing it for the first time would know right away that it is derivative of Chen style Taiji, but there is more. It is not as different as is Chen style when compared to the Yang style. It is different in the way that the Cheng Man-ch'ing style is different from traditional Yang family style. It is more like Sun style in that it incorporates many other influences, especially Xinyi.

It is not that it is not Taiji, but in many ways, it is more than Taiji. Or in Feng's words, it is Taiji "on the highest (internal) level."

On the external level there are important differences in the way that Hun Yuan style movements are performed. There are a lot of overlapping "lead in" circles performed prior to the execution of individual movements.

These "lead in" circles of the arms and waist have a very important function; they allow the practitioner to begin to rotate the dantian in the proper circle (whether horizontal, lateral, vertical or diagonal).

This method clarifies the proper dantian rotation required of the movement itself. It has the effect of externally demonstrating the internal mechanics required of that movement or technique. In addition, there are many more sinking movements, allowing the qi to properly sink to the dantian and the body to relax before going on to the next movement.

These modifications of execution are of great benefit to students who are unsure of the proper body mechanics

Continued from preceding page

in the U.S. nor translated into English.

Those masters who met and practiced push hands with him were uniformly impressed. He is considered one of the few modern masters who can actually apply the skills of Taiji along the lines of the great past masters of China. He has been denoted as one of China's "Living Treasures."

The exciting news is that Feng appears likely to be coming to the U.S. sometime next year to teach his Hun Yuan system. This long-awaited visit promises to be one of the most eagerly anticipated Taiji events in the U.S. •

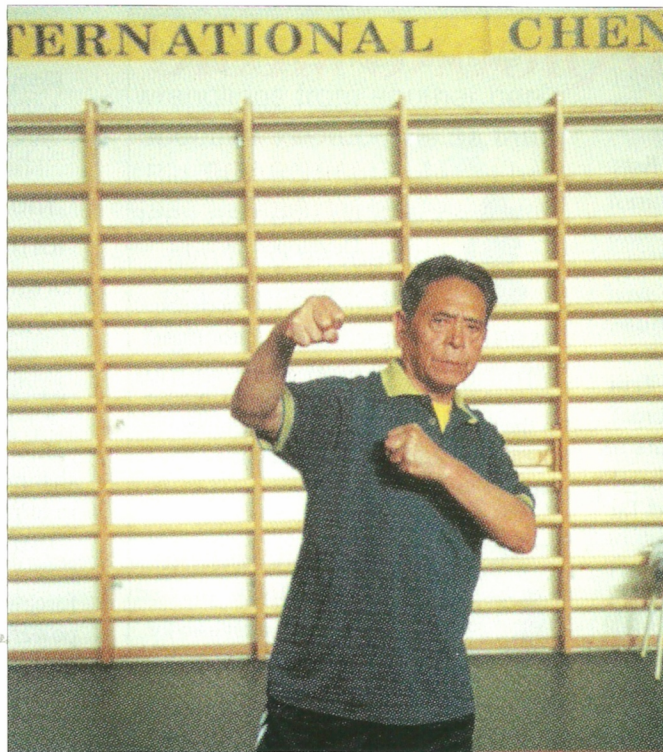
that the form requires.

The combination of sinking and overlapping also assists in creating continuity of qi flow and mental intention in the transitions between movements, allowing for one continuous flow of energy throughout the entire form.

Feng also emphasizes the importance of making movements bigger and more circular. He believes that bigger movements help to loosen and extend the major joints and promote greater and smoother qi circulation.

Bigger movements also give the practitioner greater reach and range of motion for martial arts purposes. As movements are maximized, weight shifting is also affected.

Contrary to the 60/40 weight distribution favored in most Chen style postures, Feng regularly shifts fully forward and backward toward a 100/0 weight distribution. Although Feng has one of the strongest roots in Taiji, as evidenced in his push hands, he now places less importance on fixed root-



Feng Demonstrates second half of the new movement for the 48-form movement.

ing, in favor of greater freedom of dantian rotation and fluidity of movement.

To study Feng demonstrating his form, one cannot help noting the con-

vergence of both Taiji and qigong. As he demonstrates, he sometimes even closes his eyes, as if savoring and enjoying the bliss of his own practice.

At this point, it becomes necessary to understand some of Feng's theory and philosophy underlying his Hun Yuan system, which I will discuss more fully later in this article.

One of the major differences in the way in which Feng's practice differs from traditional Chen style relates to Feng's prohibition against excess use of stamping and the use of shaking power. As far back as 1981, Feng cautioned against too much stamping as being likely to cause injury to the foot, ankle, nervous system, heart and brain.

He also believes excess shaking movements can be injurious to the health of the internal organs and brain.

Just as in repetitive stress injuries, the cumulative effect caused by stamping and shaking can create physical and mental problems over time. He feels many Chen form com-



Seated, from left: J. Justin Meehan, Feng, and Wang Feng Ming; standing from left, Herbert Parran, Jim Bushman, Troy Holloway and Laura Clark.



J. Justin Meehan training with Feng in 1981.

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This concern for health and Feng's great reputation as a qigong healer has also led him to eliminate certain movements from the Chen form, which he learned from Chen Fake, and to modify the way in which other movements are performed.

petitors overemphasize stamping and shaking to their own future detriment in terms of health.

Although Feng does stamp at times, it is in a very relaxed and less forceful manner. His use of shaking power is very rare and focused, rather than affecting the whole body and brain.

As Feng points out over and over again, Taiji should improve health and not endanger the health of the practitioner.

This concern for health and Feng's great reputation as a qigong healer has also led him to eliminate certain movements from the Chen form, which he learned from Chen Fake, and to modify the way in which other movements are performed. An example of this is the movement #59 in the 83-movement Yi Lu form, which requires a slap kick and then a drop into a half split of the legs onto the ground.

Although this is a traditional Chen style movement, Feng converts the movement into a lowering half squat of the body as in "Ground Dragon" in the Chen style or as in the "Snake Creeps Down" or "Squatting Single Whip" movement from the Yang style.

He rationalizes this based upon the lack of any real practical martial application and for health reasons.

He believes that splitting so close to the ground in such a stretched position leads to qi leakage, not to mention possible knee problems. To avoid qi leakage from the "Hui Yin" point on the pelvic underside, Feng advises against stances which are performed in too low of a "Horse Riding" stance, as is commonly seen in many Chen style competition performances.

These types of changes and com-

ments have not endeared him to many traditional Chen stylists. Based on the comments and changes made by Feng, as well as certain comments regarding Feng by certain Chen style practitioners on the orthodoxy of his form and Feng's position as the 18th generation Chen representative, certain political problems have developed.

This political situation has led to some unpleasantness in some Chen circles. Invitations for Feng to visit the Chen Village and teach, given on three separate occasions prior to 1980, have stopped.

Although many of the leading Chen family representatives have studied from Feng at one time or another, there now appears to be a kind of "breaking off of diplomatic relations" between the two camps. This has increased over the years, rather than narrowed. I bring this up only so that others may be forewarned.

Feng does not criticize Chen style or try to separate Hun Yuan Taiji from Chen style. He believes that Chen style is also the product of combining many different styles.

He points out that Chen style was created based upon a system by General Qi Jiguang (1528-1587), which was described in a book entitled "The 32 Forms of the Canons of Boxing." This system included 32 martial techniques taken from 16 major forms of Chinese martial arts then practiced in various parts of China.

The book was part of a military textbook that was famous throughout Chinese military circles and most probably influenced General Chen Wangting, who the Chen family credits with the creation of the Chen family fighting style some 100 years later in the mid 1600s.

It is said that Chen Wangting developed seven sets of boxing routines in his spare time after he retired from the military and that 29 of the major techniques practiced by Chen were derived from the 32 techniques set out in the "Canons of Boxing."

Thereafter, the seven routines passed down to Chen Changxing (1771-1853), who then took the best of these routines and combined them into the two routines that we are familiar with today and which were taught to Yang Lu-ch'an (1799-1872), who

Feng views these divisive wranglings from another perspective. His focus is on the "Big Tao" and not on what he sees as petty differences. His aim is to encourage Taiji practitioners to reach the highest level of the Big Tao, where form is less important than attaining the highest level of being.

became famous as the originator of what eventually came to be known as the Yang style of Taiji.

It is also said that Chen Fake (1887-1957), who was Feng's teacher, also modified the way in which the two forms were practiced, causing others to refer to his Chen style as the "Xin Jia" or New Style of Chen Taijiquan, as opposed to the Old Style still practiced in the Chen Village.

For this reason, there has been a continued difference of opinion regarding whether the New Style was actually an improvement or something less than what was still taught in the Chen Village.

To say it is an improvement slights the Chen villagers who did not have an opportunity to study with Chen Fake.

To say that it was not true Chen style slights the students of Chen Fake. Feng did not recognize this distinction in Chen styles.

While most people, especially Chen villagers, do differentiate between the two, an argument can be made that this is not a separation of two different styles, but rather a distinction between the different levels of Chen teachings.

Feng views these divisive wranglings from another perspective. His focus is on the "Big Tao" and not on what he sees as petty differences. His aim is to encourage Taiji practitioners to reach the highest level of the Big Tao, where form is less important than attaining the highest level of being.

In his lecture on "The Origin and Proper Practice of Taijiquan" during his 2000 Finland workshop, he stated:

"What we are talking about is the

higher level of philosophical Taoism and Taiji. We are not just talking about Taijiquan, but about Taiji and the Big Tao, the highest level and the Big Tao.

"What can we do with this Big Tao? We have the essence that transforms into qi and the qi that transforms into the spirit. We have the spirit, which returns to emptiness, and we have the emptiness that returns back into the Void.

"When you know this, you can get to the highest level and reach the Big Tao. Taijiquan is not just about Taiji boxing. It's about reaching the Big Tao."

Listening to Feng is like listening to the explanations of Quantum Physics. His view goes beyond the mechanistic Newtonian view of the world.

His explanations express the profundity of his genius and experience. He does not see Taijiquan as something different from the higher levels of Chinese Philosophical thought.

Although always ready to demonstrate the myriad variations of application in both push hands and martial contexts, he prefers the lofty heights of Lao Tsu to the fixed approach of Taiji technicians.

Of course, beginners must start somewhere, and for them he offers the simplicity of the Simplified Taiji 24 form. However, for those who want to go beyond, Hun Yuan is like a finger pointing to the moon. The focus must not be fixated on the form lest one misses, in the immortal words of Bruce Lee, "all that heavenly glory."

I think back to an experience I had once when I was reading "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying," by Sogy Rinpoche.

After reading it, I was inspired to experience a meditation on what Taiji would mean to me if I were laying on my deathbed.

Instead of a source of solace, I found that I was still wrestling with thoughts centered around whether the hook hand arm should be straighter or more rounded and whether the fingers should point down more pointedly or draw up towards the palm, like holding an egg.

In my 50s, I have found that I was not getting the ultimate benefit from my art of some 33 years, at the final

moment of my most important life challenge.

However, listening to Feng discuss how one should practice, while he was simultaneously doing the form, was both inspirational and liberating. He said practicing Taiji should not be like working on a job. Instead, he discussed the form in these poetic terms:

“What is it like to practice Taiji?

Practicing Taiji is like enjoying a peaceful rest;

Practicing Taiji is like experiencing the sensation of qi flowing smoothly and without obstruction through all the meridians;

Practicing Taiji is like the balancing of yin and yang;

Practicing Taiji feels like swimming in air;

Practicing Taiji is like a moving form of ‘standing’ skill;

Practicing Taiji is like using the body to draw beautiful Taiji diagrams;

Practicing Taiji is like drawing in the new (fresh qi) and expelling the old (stale or turbid qi);

Practicing Taiji is like the total relaxation of body and mind;

Practicing Taiji is like repairing and healing the mind, body and spirit;

Practicing Taiji is like nourishing the body with the vast, upright qi of the Universe;

Practicing Taiji is achieving the ultimate unification of Heaven, Earth, and Man.”

Perhaps these words may not strike everyone with the same inspiration, but they filled me completely, like cooling waters in a parched and arid plain.

Not everyone will achieve the same mastery of Taijiquan that Feng has attained. But all of us can be masters of our own spirituality and, in that regard, Hun Yuan Taiji can be an extraordinary method of self-cultivation.

Feng said there was a specific karmic reason why we all found ourselves studying together in Finland and, after 20 years of study, I believe that I found what I was really looking for all the while . . . the Taiji journey’s final destination—The Big Tao.

There is so much more I could write about, but this was my attempt at an Introductory 101-type approach. I

Feng admits that he has made changes in the form, but points out that Chen Fake was also credited with changing the 74-movement Lao Jia to the 83-movement Xin Jia form with added movements, as well as differences, primarily by adding extra circles into individual movements.

would encourage others to reread Yang Yang’s scholarly article in the June 2000 issue of T’ai Chi Magazine.

Feng has made many revisions of the Hun Yuan forms, to the delight of some and the frustration of others. One of his students told me that he studies with Feng every six months and has noted at least one revision on every occasion.

It appears now that the Simplified 24 Taiji Form is finalized, but Feng continues to revise, as his own understanding improves with age.

The latest revision comes at the end of the sequence known as “Small Catching and Hitting.” This sequence normally ended with a grab and punch to the mid level. The above photos of Feng show the “new” ending with an overhead strike that smashes downward using the foreknuckles.

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Many famous Chen stylists have created shortened and simplified forms such as the 38- and 19-movement forms of Chen Xiaowang and the 36-movement form of Madam Kan Gui Xiang.

These introductory forms make learning Chen style easier for beginners or those with time limitations, as well as providing standardized compe-

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YANG STYLE (PART 1)



Ye Xiao Long, 67, of Shanghai demonstrates the basic movements and the entire form of the Yang style 108-movement long form. There is repetition of short segments of the form three times, proceeding through the

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YANG STYLE (PART 2)



Ye Xiao Long demonstrates advanced stretching techniques and the entire form with names given. Then he shows the Yang style with repetition of short segments of the form three times. He

then demonstrates the entire form with medium speed. 61 Min. **1186** **\$49.95**

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tition forms, which may be judged in their own separate divisions or categories.

In regards to the present form of Hun Yuan Taiji, Feng states that it has now reached the highest level and that any further additions or changes will no longer be necessary.

I had the opportunity to meet privately with Feng to interview him regarding many of the questions I had about his Hun Yuan system. The following are excerpts that I felt would be of interest to the readers of T'AI CHI Magazine:

J. Justin Meehan: Can you explain the meaning of Hun Yuan as it relates to the name of Hun Yuan Taiji?

Feng Zhiqiang: Why do we call this system Hun Yuan? We call this Hun Yuan because Hun Yuan is the "Origin" or the "Original."

We know that the Solar System (Heaven) revolves in circles and the Earth revolves in circles as well. It is the same as with the Sun and the Moon. The entirety of the universe is revolving in circles.

Also, we people are also revolving in circles. Everything is revolving in circles together. So this term refers to the inter-related circling of everything in the universe. So Hun Yuan refers to the original movement of the universe, the original meaning of Taiji.

The practice of Taiji involves the idea of expanding our intention, ener-

gy, and movement so large that there is nothing that can contain it; so concentrated that nothing can fit inside it. When you practice like this, you feel as big as the universe. So this Hun Yuan Taiji is the Ultimate Taiji.

Hun Yuan involves all different kinds of circles. It is the same as automobiles, trains, and bicycles; also planes and boats and rockets. They all rely on engines, which depend upon circling motions in order to go.

It is through circles that the "Four ounces. can defeat 1,000 pounds." But this takes time to develop. In push hands, if you push me straight, I can turn and make circles to neutralize your force and you will be thrown away.

But if you only go straight and your opponent is bigger and stronger than you, he can beat you with force. You must be completely relaxed and use circles to overcome the attack.

JJM: I have heard it said that Hun Yuan Taiji places greater emphasis on circling the dantian than on sinking and standing. Is this true?

FZQ: There is greater emphasis on dantian rotation. It is like the saying that "In stillness, there is movement; and in movement there is stillness."

JJM: In class you said that we should practice the form with bigger movements, but in applications shouldn't the movements be small?

FZQ: It's not necessary to use

small movements in applications. You can use bigger movements to catch the opponent's movement first, before he can get to you. As the jin energy is getting bigger, so are the movements, as well. Taiji has the meaning of the "Great" or "Greatest" and so every movement should be bigger. You should practice bigger and wider to practice Taiji.

JJM: I have heard it said that people say Feng has a "Qi Ball" which can go anywhere in his body. Is this true?

FZQ: Yes, it is true; it can go anywhere through the "Jingluo" (qi channels).

JJM: Is it a ball that someone could see or something that just happens within the body?

FZQ: It is not something that someone can see. It is like water which flows inside the body as a result of long practice.

JJM: Does this mean that when you do an application the qi will flow like a ball in the water to the point of contact?

FZQ: That is correct.

JJM: What advice do you have for us on how to practice?

FZQ: You must practice every day. Even more important than the form practice is the qigong practice. If you want to get to the highest level, you must practice Hun Yuan Qigong because it will help you to get to the highest level.

JJM: In the West, people have a strong belief in God. Can one include the concept of God in terms of seeking the highest level? In other words, can one practice Hun Yuan Taiji as if praying to God?

FZQ: Yes, you can include the concept of God (Shang Di) in your practice.

JJM: Thank you, Feng. I feel as if you have freed me from the narrow focus on form and made me think that the practice of Taiji is what it means to be alive.

FZQ: That's very good.

JJM: Thank you for all your teachings. It is such a pleasure to see you again after so many (20) years. I was hoping to show you that you did not waste your time when you first taught me back in Beijing.

FZQ: I am happy to see you again also. Words cannot explain.●

Feng's Hun Yuan System

Feng Zhiqiang's Hun Yuan system contains more than just the first and second routines of the Chen Taiji system. The Hun Yuan system includes the following:

Chen Style Hun Yuan Taiji 24

Chen Style Hun Yuan Taiji 48

Chen Style Hun Yuan Taiji 71

Chen Style Hun Yuan Taiji 83

Taiji Push Hands single movements

Taiji Push Hands forms

Five ways to push hands.

Catch and Hold & Counter-Hold

Techniques of Attack and Defense

Taiji Pauchu 24

Taiji Sanshoupau 24

Weapons: Sword, Sabre, Spear,

Long-Hilt Scimitar, and Pole.

Qigong: HunYuan Qigong, Chan Si Qigong, Special Taoist Taiji Ruler, Special Taoist Taiji Ball Qigong; Taiji Stick, and Six Character Formula Method of Qigong.

The fact that there are so many forms of practice within the Hun Yuan system does not mean that all the forms have to be practiced. A Taiji practitioner who practiced the Yi Lu, or long form, would not necessarily practice the 24- or 48-form unless short on practice time.

Some beginners or seniors might practice only the qigong or chan ssu jin exercises. Martial artists would study differently than those practicing only for health. There is, in fact, something for everyone within the Hun Yuan system. ●