

Strength Training in Taijiquan

By David Gaffney

In the West people often picture Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan) as an easy option. Who can blame them when most of what now passes for Taiji is so diluted from the original battlefield system? Chenjiagou Village, in China's Henan province, is the place where Taijiquan was created some 350 years ago. Its creator, Chen Wangting (1600-1680), was a general at the end of the Ming dynasty. Since then successive generations of Chen family boxers have carried on and developed his system. Many made their living as bodyguards or *biaoshi* to merchant caravans travelling through China's lawless interior. In more recent times Chen Taijiquan has been used to protect the region from roving gangs of bandits and to fight against the Japanese invaders in the mid twentieth century.

Practicing Taijiquan in Chenjiagou allows one to cut through many misunderstandings and to taste the time-honoured means of acquiring skill.

Chen Taijiquan requires the body to be used in a unique disciplined way and has a wide-ranging training curriculum encompassing standing-pole exercise, single-movement exercises, bare-



The author working with a heavy stone weight

hand forms, push hands, weapons and supplementary equipment training. In common with other sports or martial arts, it is essential to

begin with the basics. With time and conscientious practice, the body is strengthened and one discovers a new means of moving.



Long pole training

While Chen Style Taijiquan includes many kicks and strikes within its arsenal, in essence it is a close range throwing and grappling system.

The realities of combat necessitate that a practitioner be well versed and comfortable during close-quarter fighting. The system is renowned for its joint locking, throwing and takedowns all built on its unique coiling and spiralling energy.

As the practitioner reaches a more accomplished level, the use of supplementary exercises with a variety of training equipment can further amplify this energy.

Skills such as neutralising, yielding, *qinna* (joint-locking) and explosively releasing power are more efficient when backed up by greater physical strength.

Chen Ziqiang, chief coach of the Chenjiagou Taijiquan Martial Arts School, explained that *“to become a good taiji combatant a student must be proficient in*

four areas: suzhi (constitution; the physical condition); liliang (strength); jishu (technical skill) and gongfu (cultivated skill).

It is not possible to fast-track *gongfu* or fluency with a broad range of techniques. These aspects are only possible with time and experience. However, it is possible to fast-track physical strength and “body conditioning”. This article focuses upon the second quality – physical strength.

While it may come as a surprise to many, strength training is not a new phenomenon in Taijiquan. In the past, it represented one aspect of an all-encompassing training process. In Chenjiagou, within the garden where 14th Generation Chen clan member Chen Changxin is said to have taught Yang Luchan, founder of Yang style Taijiquan, can still be found an eighty kilogram stone weight that they are said to have regularly trained with. Traditional strength training meth-

ods such as pole shaking and practicing with heavy weapons continue to be used up until today.

Over the centuries strength, endurance, and agility have been physical attributes highly valued within Chinese military circles. According to Chinese military historian Stanley Henning, military training has utilised activities such as weight lifting, long distance running, jumping, climbing, and swimming alongside the development of martial arts prowess.

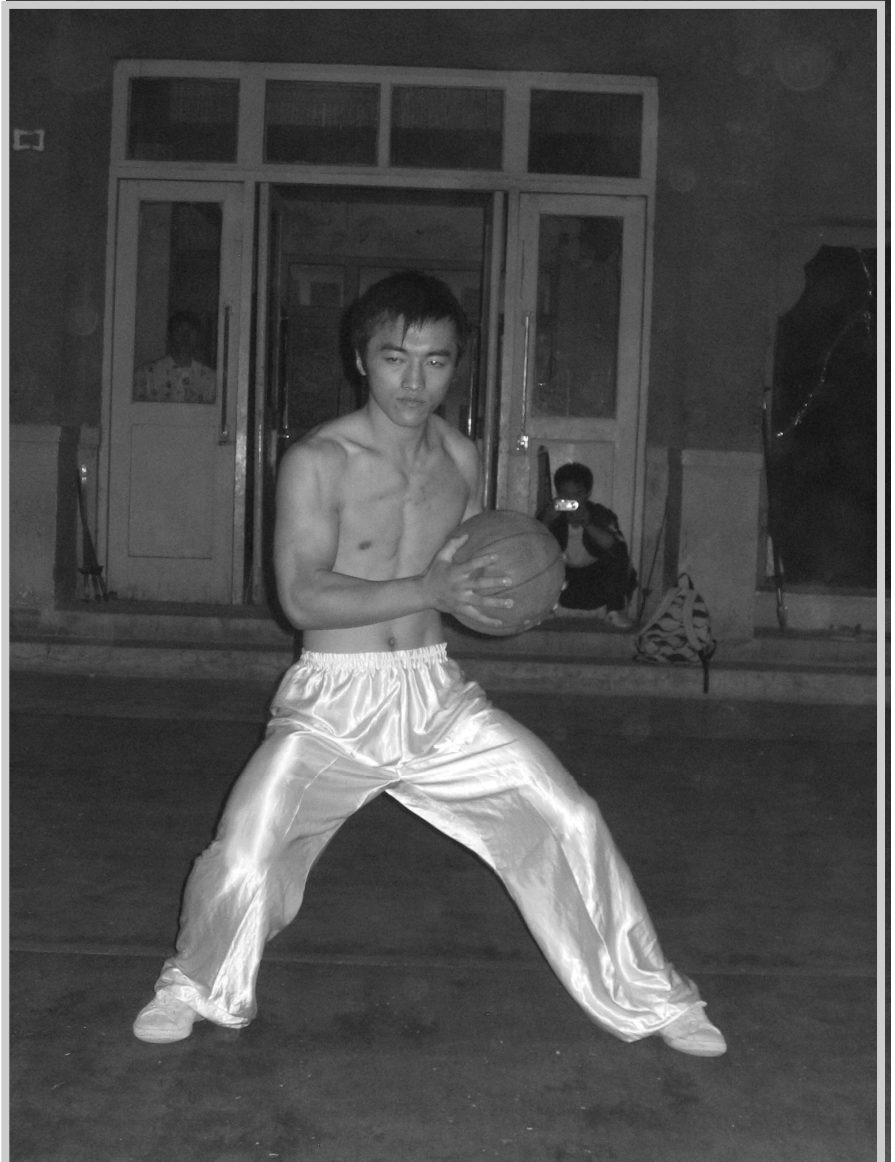
General Qi Jiguang’s training manuals - inspirational in Chen Wangting’s creation of Taijiquan - outlined a comprehensive training regimen which included: “maintaining an overall strong fighting constitution (through remaining “lean and mean”); strong hands and arms through training with heavier than normal weapons; strong feet and legs through running over 600 yards without gasping for breath, using ankle

weights (bags of sand) while running; and overall bodily strength and endurance by training while weighted down with heavier than normal armour”.

Chen Wangting had been through the Chinese imperial military examination system where candidates, in addition to tests of ability in archery while mounted and on foot, were examined in bending a 12 catty bow, brandishing the 120-catty halberd and lifting a 300-catty stone. (A catty is a Chinese unit of weight equalling 1.102 pounds). Quite naturally he included similar exercises in his new system.

Lifting heavy stones is done as a means to training the waist and lower body. Chen Ziqiang explains “the strength training method is highly specialised. You are not training to develop “stupid strength” (brute or localised strength). This is training strength in the waist. Your hand strength is like the hook you use when you are towing a car. You have to remember that your hand is the hook. Your strength is coming from the waist and how you push into the ground, combining the strength of the car and the rope. The hook is only the implement that connects the two. So when you lift the big rock, it is the strength of the legs and waist...”.

Also popular, to this day, is the exercise of shaking a



Taiji ball training

long pole as a means of increasing the amount of power that can be transmitted from the dantian (the dantian is a point about three fingers beneath the navel and approximately an inch beneath the surface - it is held to be the bodies centre of energy and balance) out to the extremities.

The pole is at least three metres in length and is used as a means of increasing whole body power and explosiveness. The practitioner trains

either a pole form that consists of thirteen methods that have been compiled into a sequence, or by training individual movement drills.

The seventeenth generation master Chen Fake, one of the most renowned practitioners of the modern era, is said to have performed three hundred repetitions of the "pole shaking" exercises.

In Chenjiagou both the spear and the long pole are typically made from a particular kind of wood called bailagan



Chen Ziqiang training with a guandao

白腊杆 (white wax wood), a strong but flexible wood that allows the practitioner to transmit force through it and bends to absorb impact preventing damage to the weapon.

As well as form training for whole body strength, a number of two-person "sticking" drills are also practised with the pole to enhance the 'listening' ability and combat skill of practitioners.

Taiji Ball training is used to strengthen the torso, condition the muscles, and increase physical power. Stories are handed down of past masters training with stone balls weighing 60kg.

Students in the Chenjiagou Taijiquan School today use a basketball filled with sand to train the system's unique spiralling and rotational movement. Through a range of coiling movements the practitioner works towards a stage where the movement of their dantian leads the movement of the ball.

There is also the *Taiji Bang* - a short stick used to develop seizing, locking and escaping skills. Usually about the length of one's forearm, the bang is used for twisting and stretching the tendons and developing the strength of the grip and forearms.

Weapons Training

Weapons training is another means of developing strength in the Chen Taijiquan curriculum. The most widely practised weapons are the straight sword, broadsword, spear and halberd (*guandao*).

Each have their own unique characteristics and conditioning benefits. The sword trains flexibility and the full extension of one's body; the sabre is fast and explosive and could be likened to plyometrics in modern athletic training; while the spear trains agile footwork and upper and lower body co-ordination.

One common method of in-

creasing strength is to train with heavier weapons

The guandao, also known as the "spring & autumn broadsword" or less prosaically as the "big knife" is regarded as Chen Taijiquan's heavy artillery. Unlike the spear and the pole, the spring & autumn broadsword historically was the most often deployed weapon by Chinese military officers. Due to the exclusive and expensive nature of the weapon, it became a symbol of military rank, and was often ornately decorated. The name *guangdao* derived its name from the legendary Chinese general Guan Yu, who was respectfully given the title of Lord Guan (Guangong), from the tumultuous "Three Kingdoms" period of Chinese history. He reputedly used a weapon weighing eighty-two *jin* 斤 (one *jin* is about five hundred grams).

This was also the favoured weapon of Taijiquan's creator Chen Wangting. Because of this he acquired the nickname "Equal to Guan Yu" () because of his military exploits and his proficiency in the use of the *guandao*. The dynamic nature of the *guandao* form, with its sudden changes in direction, sharp turns and explosive leaping movements makes it a wonderful body-conditioning tool.

Today's practitioners use weapons ranging from a few kilograms to more than twenty

kilograms. Its practice is based on thorough grounding in the core skills of Taijiquan, as it demands a stable lower plane, good upper body strength, and excellent spatial awareness.

Though rarely seen in the wider world, within Chenjiagou knowledge of a wide assortment of traditional weapons has been preserved up to the present. Some, like the two section pole form, have evolved from agricultural tools to gradually become incorporated into the Chen Family Taijiquan weapons syllabus. Others have been handed straight down from the battlefield.

As well as the aforementioned, weapons practiced today include double swords, double broadswords, double maces, and the 3 and 8 movement pole forms.

Maintaining the tradition of training in these classical Chinese weapons enhances an individual's overall skills, preserves an unbroken tradition of martial culture and greatly increases one's physical and cardiovascular fitness.

David Gaffney is co-author of ***The Essence of Taijiquan*** which can be ordered through www.chentaijigb.co.uk

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ANSWER IN NEXT ISSUE**

