

A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN TRADITIONAL YANG STYLE OF YANG CHENGFU AND CHENG MANCHING'S STYLE.

By J. Justin Meehan

At the July, 1990, Taste of China seminar in Winchester, Virginia, America received the rare opportunity to study the standard Yang style of Taijiquan from Yang Zhenduo, the third son of Yang Chengfu. Yang Zhenduo, who was 65 years old (in 1990), began studying from his father, Yang Chengfu (1883-1936), when he was six, but only spent four years under his famous father's tutelage. However, he also studied from his elder brothers and probably some of his father's senior students.

It was evident at the seminar that Yang Zhenduo intended to teach his father's form exactly as it had come down to him over the years and with special emphasis on justifying each and every posture with accompanying photos and ink drawings of his father's movements. In comparison with these sources, I noticed only slight variances which may be explained either as a result of family-style practice or as an attempt to slightly differentiate his style from that of his father's leading students, such as Yang-style authority, Fu Zhonwen, who is greatly respected among Taiji practitioners around the world.

Standardization

But the message is clear: it can now be stated that the Yang style has been clearly standardized as a form. **Many American Yang-style practitioners will be forced to recognize that their form has varied somewhat from the original.** Some have overemphasized hidden potential applications, while others have over emphasized the passive Qigong experience. To the extent that these people recognize they are using the form for their own purposes, there should be no problem. However, **they will be forced to realize they are practicing a variation of the standard Yang family style.**

Sung

In the case of the Cheng Manching style that has recently been erroneously referred to as the Yang style, this seminar proved there may be less room for confusion between the two internal styles. In fact, Yang Zhenduo went to great lengths to differentiate between the types of movements exemplified in the Cheng Manching and his father's style, and he made it clear that he wanted to highlight essential requirements of his father's style. These stylistic differences can be summarized by the difference in interpretation over the Chinese word "sung." To the Cheng Manching stylists, this word has always contained the ideas of being sunken, relaxed, and empty. Yang Zhenduo, however, emphasized the characteristics of being open, extended, and full.

To Yang Zhenduo, the Cheng Manching style would appear weak and collapsed. To the Cheng stylist, the Yang style might appear too overextended or external.



Yang Chengfu



Yang Zhen duo



Cheng Manching

Stances

By way of specific examples, the Yang style **front stance** purposefully straightens the rear leg in opposition to the force used in the bent forward leg, which pushes back against the forward thrust of the rear leg.

In the Cheng style, the rear leg is bent so that the knee of the rear leg hangs in a direct line below that side's shoulder. Furthermore, the Cheng style does not allow a dynamic tension to exist between the forward and rear leg. As a result, the Yang stance is much longer than the Cheng stance. Also, the Yang style advocates a forward incline of the upper body in the front stance. In the Cheng style the upper body is maintained in a straight up-and-down position, perpendicular to the floor.

In terms of the **rear or back stance**, the Yang style allows 30 percent of the weight to remain on the front foot. The Cheng style advocates the emptying of the weight of the forward leg and the complete transfer of all weight to the rear foot. The Yang rationale is contained in the yin/yang (double fishes) diagram. Seventy percent of the weight on one leg represents yang within, which also has an element of yin, while 30 percent weight on the other foot represents yin with an element of yang. As with the front stance, the Yang style advocates a dynamic counter tension between the two legs, while the Cheng style does not. In both styles, the upper body is straight up and down, not inclined, over the rear base leg.

Arms

Similar differences exist in the arm formations. The Yang arm is opened out and extended with the appearance of being straightened but not straight, while the Cheng style arms maintain more of a 90-degree angle at the elbow. In both styles, the shoulder is sunken, not raised, and the elbow points down. In such forward arm movements as the press, push, or punch, the Yang-style extension allows the hands to go beyond the forward foot, while the Cheng-style hands flow no further than the forward foot. The Cheng-style palm formation, called the "Beautiful Lady's Hand," is a relaxed palm with no bend at the wrist. The Yang hand formation is somewhat between a palm formation and a "Willow Leaf" palm edge formation, with the wrist pronated (i.e., sink or "sit" the wrist).

Footwork

One of the major differences between the Yang and the Cheng styles involves footwork. In the Cheng style form, one begins by completely shifting his or her weight from one foot to the other and then by stepping out with the empty foot to form the lead leg in the new direction. The rear leg then pivots on the rear leg's heel to create the proper 45-degree angle for the new front stance rear leg's base of support.

In the Yang form, there is no rear leg adjustment. Prior to moving, the new base leg is put in a position to eliminate the need for any subsequent or simultaneous adjustment of the rear base leg while extending the palm or fist.

Also, in the Yang-style kicking sequences and in the movement of "Golden Cock Stands on One Leg," the base supporting leg is almost straight, while the Cheng style favors a deeper, bent-knee position.

Peng

As a result, in its front stance attacks, the Yang style appears to be relying upon the biomechanical structure of the body to maximize the potential of carrying upward through an aligned body the force of pushing off the ground and conveying that force directly to the point of contact.

By comparison, the Cheng style appears to be consciously striving in its form postures to maintain a relaxed neutrality in all its postures, so it would be in position to change passively from a yang to yin position to neutralize. I believe the Yang postures emphasize its peng or supportive positioning in each posture and in all major body parts involved in the posture. Also, the Cheng style loosens rather than extends its postures to be more sensitive to the slightest variance or change in an opponent's response, emphasizing neutralization over peng strength.

According to Yang Zhenduo, the eight energies – known to many as ward off, roll back, press (squeeze), push, pull down (pluck), split or separate, elbow, and shoulder – and the five directions – forward, backward, turning right, turning left, and maintaining the center – are incorporated in every movement of the form, at least potentially. This cannot be possible without both peng and central stability. Perhaps we can say that the peng aspect is expressed more clearly in the Yang style while hidden in the Cheng style.

Yang Zhenduo continually tested the proper formation and final position of the form practitioner's posture by providing resistance to the formation of posture and by pushing against the practitioner's hand positions in the completion of the final posture. For example, in the push posture, Yang would push back against the practitioner's extended palms to see whether the practitioner had his body properly aligned. It appears that a Cheng stylist would be more interested in his body's turning from or neutralizing such resistance, using only four ounces of force, rather than creating impenetrable peng resistance.

Postures

While most know the Cheng style is a reorganized and shortened version of the Yang-style choreography, the Cheng style has also changed the manner in which certain postures are performed.

The most notable change is in the "Single Whip" posture. In the Cheng style, the hips are squared forward and the rear "hook" hand is only slightly behind the right hip at about a 100-

degree angle to the forward palm. In the Yang style, the right hip is opened outward (the tantien faces the camera), and the two arms approximately form a 160-degree angle. In Cheng's posture, the tantien faces the front in the same direction of the front left foot. In Yang's posture, the left arm is extended, the wrist is settled, and the fingertips are lifted with the palm extended. In Cheng's posture, the left wrist is straight and the left elbow is not extended out. Yang's left elbow is extended out and aligned above the left knee, and the back leg is bent in Cheng's but straight in Yang's posture. (See above: **Stances**)



Yang Chengfu



Yang Zhenduo



Cheng Manching

The hips are also more open in the Yang-style movements of “Left Ward Off” and “Fan through the Back.”

Cheng Manching admitted to changing the footwork of the "Step Back and Repulse Monkey" sequence for health reasons with feet stepping back in a parallel formation.

The Yang style steps back into a 45-degree narrow stance and then readjusts the front foot to face forward. The Cheng style steps straight back, as if the feet were traveling on separate railroad tracks, with both feet pointing forward a shoulder width apart. The purpose for such unusual stepping was related to opening the lower spine area between and just above the buttocks so that the "chi" would more easily flow upward. While none of these changes in the manner in which the standard Yang form postures are done in Cheng's form violate the Taiji Classics, which set out the fundamental principles of Taijiquan, it is clear that there are clear stylistic differences between the Yang and the Cheng styles.

Spirit

With such substantial stylistic differences of approach between the two, it is also understandable that the manner and spirit in which these styles are performed also vary. While both styles move slowly and continuously, their appearance is qualitatively different and observable.

Yang Zhenduo exhibits a much more outward martial appearance while Cheng Manching's later appearance is much more inward directed and tranquil. This appearance goes beyond knowing that many of the photos and films of Cheng Manching were taken later in his life as he

grew older. It also goes beyond the physical body types of the leaner Cheng Manching in comparison to the more stocky and robust appearances of Yang Zhenduo and his father.

As previously mentioned, the hallmarks of the standard Yang style are openness, expansiveness, and roundedness.

There also is a great emphasis by the Yang family on **Spirit**, not in the sense of spirituality as we have come to think of it in Taijiquan, but more in the sense of vitality and martial spirit. Yang Zhenduo, quoting from the Classics, emphasized that the mind of the Taijiquan practitioner should be on the spirit and not the "chi." He said the spirit of the form should be observable in the manner in which the postures were presented (i.e. presentation) and especially in the eyes of the performer, which should be open and manifesting the spirit of the martial performance. He added that the eyes should resemble a cat about to pounce on a rat or a falcon poised before seizing its prey.

Chi

Many Taijiquan performers tend to concentrate on what they perceive as the "chi." Yang Zhenduo took special pains to separate the Yang-style approach from what might otherwise be considered a Qigong approach, with eyes mostly closed and looking inward. He clearly advised against this internally directed focus, leaving it to the fields of Qigong exercises and not intruding upon the standard Yang style. I felt a great deal of expressiveness and spirit in Yang Zhenduo's presentation. The Classics state that the chi should be stimulated. Yang Zhenduo said this would happen naturally as one actually imagined; while practicing the form, one should actually confront an enemy who was preparing to attack.

The Cheng Manching school would perhaps admonish us to consider the foregoing Classic's following sentence that "the spirit of vitality should be retained internally."

Breath

While on the subject of chi, the practice of breathing (which is closely associated) should also be compared. In both styles, the beginner is urged to breathe naturally and not to be too concerned "with matching movements with breath." However, at a later stage, Yang Zhenduo stated that all outgoing movements such as punches, pushes, and kicks should be accompanied by an exhaling of the breath and that all incoming movements should be done while inhaling. This is a very natural expression when issuing force.

Several schools of the Cheng style advocate the opposite. Psychologically, I believe that this might indicate a more inward or "yin" orientation of the Cheng school and a more outward or "yang" orientation of the Yang school.

Is Bigger Better?

Clearly, the Yang and Cheng style should be separated when discussing separate various schools of Taijiquan.

Does this mean that the Cheng style is automatically inferior to the Yang style? I would say no. The Cheng style has proved its right to distinction. The fact that its outward appearance is different does not say much by itself. Yang Chengfu's "big" style appeared different from his elder brother, Yang Shaohou.

Before that, the Yang family art was practiced in a "small" style by Yang Banhou and a "medium" style by his brother, Yang Jianhou, who learned from their father, Yang Lu chan.

As everyone knows or should know by now, Yang Luchan learned the art from the Chen family and then changed the form to make it easier for others to learn.

A Cheng style practitioner could easily point to the Taiji Classics' saying, attributed to Wang Chung Yueh, that one should first seek open and expanded postures and later make them smaller and more compact.

In Defense of the Cheng Style

The Cheng Manching style has much to offer in its simplicity, brevity, and compactness with emphasis on total relaxation. It is a much more accessible style for the aged or infirmed, the person with limited time, and women or men who do not prefer large open stances. In terms of following Yang sequencing, it tracks the Yang style much more closely than the Chinese government's simplified 24 postures (which are more akin to playing musical scales rather than melodies). And it certainly is among the most popular styles of Taijiquan in the U.S.

Cheng Manching was one of the few acknowledged Taijiquan masters known to the West to have emerged from the Yang Chengfu school, and his students, including William C. C. Chen, Ben Lo, Abraham Liu, Robert Smith, and even T. T. Liang, have all achieved respect and a place of honor in the American community.

Competition

In terms of competition, Lenzie Williams must be recognized as one of the foremost push-hands competitors in the U.S. He has achieved this position not because he is big or knows certain competitive push-hands techniques. In speaking with those who have competed against him and in pushing with him myself, I have learned that his skill, like his personality, is based upon intelligence, sensitivity, softness, and dedication to Taiji principles. He is living proof of the viability of the Cheng style and brings great honor to his teacher, Ben Lo, and his teacher's teacher, Cheng Manching. While the Cheng style has not garnered much acclaim in form competition, this may be more a result of having Cheng competitors compete under the Yang-style division. Because of the popularity of the Cheng style and its pointed differences between the Yang and Cheng styles, I would advocate the addition of a Cheng-style forms division in all future Taiji forms competitions.

Martial practicality

In terms of martial practicality, William C.C. Chen, my first Taijiquan teacher, has perhaps done more than anyone in America to prove the martial effectiveness of his art (which, although it grew out of the Cheng style has, evolved into something both unique and original). Besides having proved the effectiveness of his style in the "street," he has also worked closely with Western-style boxers. Whether in the gym or "street," most accomplished fighters advocate a narrow stance bent at the knees, as in the Cheng style. Furthermore, bent arms and legs store potential power. Thus, the Cheng stylist can certainly justify his stance's practicality from a realistic perspective. It is interesting to note that **William C. C. Chen** also advocates a forward upper body bend prior to issuing his explosive power.

Two Styles, One Art

The Cheng style is not alone in evolving into a more compact and formless style. Other noted styles of a smaller frame include the respected Wu style created by Wu Yuhsing and the Sun style created by Sun Lutang. We can only conclude that the differences in style between the Yang and the Cheng are merely two paths attempting to achieve the same objectives. Both styles justify their efforts through recourse to the classics; however, each style has its individual interpretation and manner of expression. The Yang and Cheng styles are indeed different but both equally worthy of respect. In the end, both are one Taijiquan.