

Chen Qingzhou on:

# Leading the Opponent into Emptiness

By Marvin Smalheiser

*Anthony (Tony) Wong was translator for this interview.*

While conducting a workshop in a southern U.S. city, Chen Qingzhou was asked by a 6'3" man weighing about 310 pounds if he could test Chen's dantian, or lower abdomen. The man who was much taller and heavier than Chen's 5'9" and 130 pounds, had been doing T'ai Chi Ch'uan for many years.

Chen let him put his hands on his dantian to try to push him and the man slowly exerted pressure and pushed tentatively, trying to find a hard place to push. Chen rotated his dantian as the man did this. Suddenly the big man tried to push Chen and then fell onto the floor.

Chen used his neutralization skill to lead the man into emptiness, which Chen feels is the essence to Chen style T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

During a discussion after the incident, the man explained that when he was looking to push, he followed the prescribed rules of sinking his shoulders, sinking the kua and searching for Chen's center, which was moving constantly. When he thought he had found it, he pushed.

Chen, aware that this was what the man was trying to do, kept his dantian "ball" turning and turning. Then he "gave" the man the dantian, making the man think that he could push it, but instead as he pushed, Chen moved his dantian "ball" once again and the man fell into

emptiness.

It is not easy to acquire this skill, Chen concedes. "To get this skill, timing, and sensitivity, you have to really practice long and hard, doing the form, and partner practice with a lot of people."

Chen, who was in the U.S. for three months this past spring, is an intense, focused practitioner and teacher. He feels there are two primary points to the development of good T'ai Chi

Ch'uan.

First, you have to nurture your root and develop a strong foundation.

Second, you have to learn to sink your qi, or internal energy, to the dantian.

Chen Qingzhou said that T'ai Chi Ch'uan is an internal art in part because it emphasizes the wise, or lively qi, within the dantian. This is done, he said, largely through practice of the form, but also through special training,

such as stationary postures, and other techniques like the use of a cast iron ball for certain exercises. Through this training, Chen said, the qi energy is developed and can be led through the body.

One of the goals, he said, is to use the external movement to stimulate the internal energy and then to use the internal energy to drive the external movement. In the Chen style, this, in part, involves the physical rotation of a "ball" in the abdomen. This is used to help gather energy and to direct energy.

Chen said the internal aspect of this kind of training comes from a combination of a physical, external cast iron T'ai Chi ball moving in a training pattern and an internal "ball" rotating in the dantian. At the same time the Yi, or intention, is trained to follow these movements. "Basically, this method can help the dantian to wake up."

"It is like having a T'ai Chi ball inside the body in the lower abdomen," Chen said.

"The dantian becomes the body's center mass inside the body. The Yin and



After tossing the cast iron T'ai Chi ball high in the air, Chen Qingzhou waits to catch it.

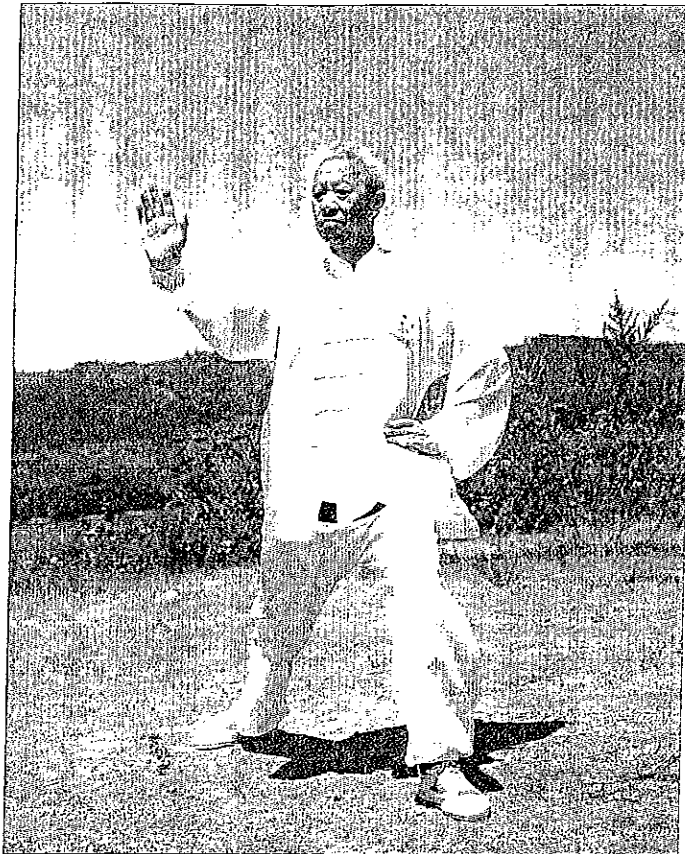
Yang are all there. When we do applications in sparring and push hands this energy is used. As soon as I touch someone's hand, their energy comes in and is transmitted inside to my inner T'ai Chi ball and my T'ai Chi ball will turn to a certain angle or a certain kind of rotation to neutralize and capture and collect the person's energy."

Chen Qingzhou, born in 1933, grew up and still lives in the small village of Xulu, near the Chen family village. He studied with Chen Zhaopei, who was famous for having revived the practice of Chen style in the Chen village, where he had returned after working many years in other parts of China.

Chen Qingzhou has been faithfully practicing the Chen style as taught by Chen Zhaopei ever since. He has been a major teacher in the area and his four sons have distinguished themselves as local champions and one as a national champion.

"In Chen T'ai Chi Ch'uan," he said, "the first thing is to have a healthy body. The gongfu, or martial aspect, is about fighting skill. The way we do the martial aspect is to follow the classic teachings, sink the kua, relax the body, straighten the body, and practice slowly, stably, and comfortably. Extend movements handsomely and connect all the movements together. Make all the connections so that they become as one movement. And breathe naturally.

"A lot of time when we are doing the first form, or yi lu, we do the postures over and over and over so that we get the posture right. Slowly, slowly, by doing this over



Eyebrow Level Strike from the Second Form.



Chen Qingzhou pushes hands with Dan Gere.

and over thousands of times, you are gradually nurturing your qi.

"This is because when you are doing the form, you follow the T'ai Chi classics. When you are doing this, it is almost like qigong. You are sinking your qi. You are nurturing your qi. Then, you use the external movement to attract or to lead the qi.

"At the beginning, we use external movement to lead the qi to nurture the qi. Once you have the qi, you use the qi to push the external movement out. It pushes, leads and guides the movement.

"Now when I do the movements, it is not external. My mind directs the qi and the external movements are executed. My intention and qi move out and push the external movement out."

Chen said, "When you can connect the movement and the qi, your movement will be different. When you do the movement, you will feel the qi.

"If you have the qi and you have the movement, there will be a big difference. You will feel it. Your hands may have a tingling feeling, the muscles will expand a little bit, and your dantian will feel that it is sinking more.

"There may be warmth felt in the kidneys and you may feel the legs getting heavier and heavier. Sometimes some people might feel a little faint when they do too much of this before they have gotten used to it.

"When you have connected your energy, your movement will be as a unit. There is no up and down and left and right, no linear movements, just spiral movements, dantian spirals, body spirals, and

knees and ankles and everything coordinated. It may be just a little bit but it makes a big difference.

"All movements start with the circle. If you are doing this, you will be within the rules of T'ai Chi. The T'ai Chi symbol is round and within the circle is Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang are soft and hard. Within the Yang there is Yin and within the Yin there is the Yang. Because of that you can balance the Yin and Yang. Then you can use it wisely. It is not only soft: it is not only hard."

Chen said that a lot of people who practice T'ai Chi are still doing it as an external art. "A lot of people think they are doing T'ai Chi and are teaching T'ai Chi for many years, but they are not doing it as an internal art because they haven't developed the dantian.

"Their qi is not in the dantian. Some people don't even know what it is. They just talk about the root, kua, the connection, and it is still very external.

"Any good external martial artist will have a good root. Even external martial artists talk about achieving a good ground connection. But the dantian rotation and sinking the qi to the dantian is something they don't have.

"They may have strong legs, but strong legs may not mean a good root. They may have a good root and ground connection to generate energy, but they may not have the internal aspects and



A T'ai Chi ball exercise.

the neutralization."

Chen said is important to develop a sense of internal soong, which is sometimes translated as relaxation but is more that relaxation. "A lot of time when we talk about soong, people think about external soong. External soong is important. It is the idea of being relaxed. But there is also internal soong in which your mind has to tell itself to relax. You don't want to tense up your mind while your external is relaxed. Internal soong is when your energy does not go out. It goes down and sinks to the dantian, settling there.

The mind has to be peaceful. That is called soong."

He said that even while doing the second Chen routine, Pao Chui, which calls for an angry attitude as part of the form, the internal has to be soong and the qi should be sinking. The mind is relaxed as well as the external aspects, such as the shoulder and elbow.

Chen Qingzhou is always practicing T'ai Chi. Whenever possible, he is rotating his dantian or working with the bang, a small, bent stick that he twists and turns. The stick, a little longer than the width of two hands, is bent at an 110-degree angle and is used to

simulate grasping techniques. He carries it with him all the time and also coordinates its use with rotating the dantian.

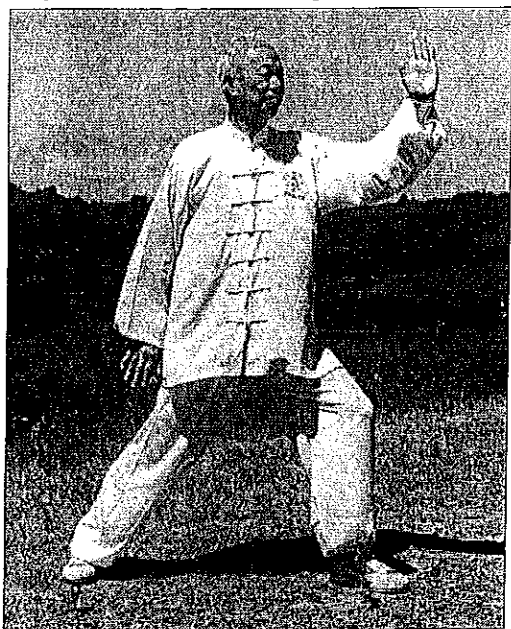
At his home in Xulu village, there is a school, set up by the government in 1986, and students come there from throughout China and the world to train with him.

For those that come to study for a couple of months or more, he will require them to practice standing zhan zhuang postures for at least seven days before learning any form movements. At first they will have to stand in a low posture for at least one minute and then expand that.

He wants people to be able to do at least three minutes of standing in a low posture before teaching them the form. For someone who is doing the standing, it is not just one or three minutes a day but one or three minutes or more at a time followed by a break and then repeated standing.

Chen said the reason he requires this is that he wants them to have the feeling of qi with the light qi going up and the heavy qi going down. "I want them to feel the qi going down the kua and into the legs before they start doing the form."

He uses the same posture illustrated in the famous book by Chen Xin with the right hand in front of the chest, palm facing left, and the left hand behind the back at waist level with a



Reverse Step from the First Form.



Full Cannon Fist, Second Form.

hooked hand with the hook facing up. The posture is one of the movements of the Chen Style Xiao Jia, although Chen Qingzhou uses a narrower stance.

Even after the students have completed their seven days of standing, Chen will require a daily practice of zhan zhuang before form sessions.

In teaching the form, he said the postures can be done low, medium, or high, but for martial art purposes and good gong-fu, lower is better as long as the buttocks do not go below the knees. Also critical, he said, is that when going low, the body must still be relaxed and flexible and avoid becoming stiff because of the low posture.

One method of training, he said, is to practice under an adjustable platform to strengthen the legs. Doing it in a high stance may be good for cultivating the qi if you can be relaxed, but if a person can go low and remain relaxed, "that is where gong-fu comes from. That's what martial art comes from."

He also has exercises to strengthen various parts of the body, as well as qin na, or grappling, exercises.

After learning the first form of the Chen style, students practice push hands. The emphasis in push hands is not to push the other person over, but to search for your own and your part-



First Form Gong-Fu Frame, Fair Maiden Works Shuttles.

ner's center of equilibrium and to find the perimeter of their stability. The partners will indicate to each other when they have exceeded their own center of gravity and have become unstable. This enables them to learn not to go outside their own boundary, where they are stable and balanced, and also to learn how they can enlarge and deepen it.

He suggests that people can enlarge their range by working on the kua and sinking deeper. Then the actual effective perimeter naturally grows. By stretching the kua and waist area, he said the mobility will increase along with the freedom to turn without getting stuck.

Chen said that when some people practice push hands they go at each other like two cows. Instead, he said, they should train with each other to find their center and the boundaries of the center of gravity. "You must know it and not go outside of it. So we push each other very gently and lightly until one person is off-balance just a little bit. One person gives a signal and they start again from the beginning to search for the center again." He calls this zhou hua, or running neutralization.

There are also exercises with the T'ai Chi ball, a black, cast iron ball, hollow in the center, about the size of a bowling ball. It is about 9.5 inches in diameter and can weigh 5 to 25 kilos (2.25 to 11.25 pounds). The usual size is 10 to 15 kilos. It is used to help strengthen the dantian, the dantian rotation, and related parts of the body.

This helps cultivate in the dantian an internal T'ai Chi ball, which serves as a center mass for the body and a tool in push hands and form practice.

The inner T'ai Chi ball also has its own boundary when a person is doing push hands, Chen said.

"If you are still within your boundary when someone is pushing you, then you can still neutralize the opposing force. Once you pass the boundary, or perimeter, you can be pushed off center. So you have to know this point in yourself since it varies with a person's development, root, weight, and physical shape."

Chen said he uses his Yin aspect to absorb the opponent's Yang energy and cause them to lose balance. "Once the opponent is off balance, he becomes Yin and then I can come back at him with Yang energy or fa-jin him."

In order to use explosive force, or fa-jin, Chen said, you first have to know how to store. "Once you know



Single Straight Sword, Spread Wings.



Green Dragon Emerges from Water, First Form.

how to store, slowly you will know how to fa-jin. Storing is the basis for exerting force."

Storing, he said, involves storing your own energy, while you are leading the other person's energy into emptiness. "When the other person is in emptiness, that is the time that you finish your storing and that is the time to do fa-jin."

When doing qin na, he said, the storing can take place in the dantian, wrists, shoulders, and elbows. And the storing and fa-jin take place almost at the same time to neutralize and issue energy.

Chen said that breathing should be natural, but qualified that it may differ according to the circumstance. For instance, he said that when you store, which involves contracting movement, you inhale. When you issue energy, you exhale. But he said it should be done naturally.

"If you have to force it, then it is not natural." He said the belly expands as you exhale when doing fa-jin. "You can't inhale when you are doing fa-jin."

In doing the Chen style, particularly the forceful second routine, or pao chui, the breathing pattern can vary. For example, he said that when doing the form at certain times, a person might take two seconds to inhale and exhale for six seconds or the other way



Spring-Autumn Great Broadsword: Arms Pushing, Dragon Measures the Water.

around. Or there might be a couple of exhales and then an inhale.

"Sometimes there is a long exhale and a short inhale. Sometimes there is a short exhale and a long inhale. It is all according to your movement or your intention or application."

The concept of open and close, Chen said, is part of the basic knowledge of T'ai Chi. "Each move-

ment has open and close and before starting any movement, just standing, there is Wuji, or nothingness; no open and no close, no Yin and no Yang. But once you start moving, Wuji is still there, but T'ai Chi is also there and there is open and close. In each movement, you have to distinguish open and close and empty and full. Otherwise, it is not T'ai Chi. These are the basic concepts of T'ai Chi."

Generally, he said, when you are moving, you have open and when there is stillness, there is close. When he issues energy, there is open and when he stores, there is close. When he expands, there is open and when he contracts, there is

close. To push is to open.

He said when the dantian is moving or expanding, it is opening. It is open when it goes to one side and when it goes back down or sinks, it closes.

Chen said that use of the yi, or mind, in T'ai Chi starts with the heart. "You have to have the heart to think about something and to keep your mind on something. If your mind does not pay attention, you do not have the intention."

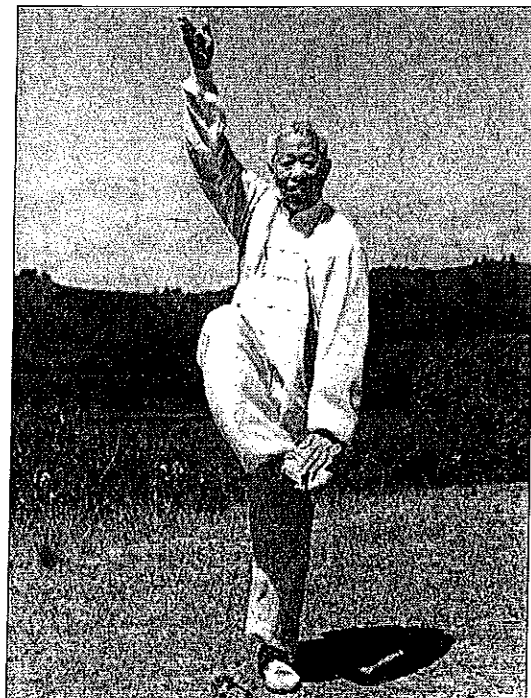
The main thing when practicing, he said, is to pay attention and stay focused. "When you are doing the form, you are really thinking about the form. Pay attention to the purpose of the movement, whether it is to punch, kick, or qin na. When you neutralize, you focus. This is the way to train your mind to focus. Then your intention starts coming.

Sometimes people hit other people but still have a smile on their face. This means they are not focusing on what they are doing.

"You have to practice to focus your attention so you know what you are doing when you are doing the form. You have to train the mind to be very serious. If you are not paying attention, how can you really learn something? The first requirement is to have full, 100 percent attention. Once your mind



Subdue the Tiger, Second Form.



Crossing Foot, First Form.

is trained like this, the intention, the yi, will come naturally.”

Chen is optimistic about the development of T'ai Chi in the West and particularly in the U.S. He has been in the U.S. each time for three months and each time has noticed the differences between the cultures of East and West.

He said he has slowly started to learn about Western culture and now feels that more and more people are slowly accepting the traditional Chen style first routine. He said he has taught students all over the world but feels the future for Chen developing in the U.S. is significant because with each trip he has seen meaningful improvements.

He feels that the Chen T'ai Chi is a very practical art. But he doesn't feel it matters what kind of T'ai Chi you are doing as long as you don't collapse and are not stiff. "You always need to maintain your spring energy throughout. Keep this peng energy all the time."

For him the peng energy is the same as chan si jin, or spiral energy.

Qi, he said, is the sensation of energy that people feel. Jin, or internal strength, he said, can be considered as cultivated, purposeful, or intentional qi, also sometimes called clear qi.

"Internal strength can be cultivated by standing meditation, as well as by practicing the T'ai Chi form. Beginners will slowly gain the ground connection, or root," Chen said, "but it will still be more external in early stages."

"The internal strength starts from the dantian. Practicing with the T'ai Chi ball is one way to achieve the use of the dantian to fa-jin and to neutralize."

Chen started learning Chen style from Chen Zhaopei when he was about 26 years old, although his father and grandfather had practiced T'ai Chi and had taught him. But the teaching of Chen Zhaopei at that time marked the a revival of the Chen style in the Chen village. Other students at the time were Wang Xian, Chen Xiaowang, Zhu Tian Cai, and Chen Zheng Lei.

He has been a serious student ever

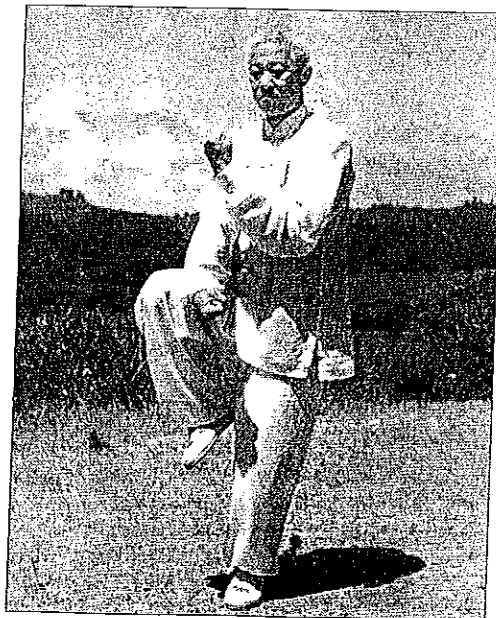


Single Broadsword vs. Spear.

since and requires his students to be serious, insisting that they take notes, discuss principles, and give detailed explanations as necessary.

"You cannot learn T'ai Chi Ch'uan from a tape or a book. There has to be a person there to teach you and show you. It has to be shown by a person who can demonstrate how it feels."

Chen has been equally serious in training his own family and has four sons who are push hands champions. He said that all the children in the Chen village start learning T'ai Chi when they are around 7 to 8 years old, and when they go to the regular school in the Chen village, they are taught



Lower Body Strike, Second Form.

T'ai Chi in school.

But in some families, like that of Chen Qingzhou, training starts even earlier.

Chen said it is easier to guide the children when they are still babies and to encourage positive attitudes.

His eldest son, Chen Youze, featured in the February 1999 issue of **TAI CHI Magazine**, started at two to three years old and now his grandson is starting at one to two years old. He said that the children do not do the whole form, but they try to influence them early. He gave the example of encouraging Chen Youze to punch and kick in exchange for getting his

breast feeding.

In the entire area, he said many people and teachers practice daily and there are many training halls in Wenxian County, the country where the Chen village is located.

Chen said the county used to have a rule that before someone could become governor of the county, he had to know how to practice T'ai Chi.

When Chen Zhaopei was teaching about 1963 to 1964, the county governor and secretary were all his students.

Chen Qingzhou, himself, is the chief judge, coach, and instructor for the international tournament that is held every two years at the Wenxian Sports area.

Of all the requirements for studying T'ai Chi, Chen said the most important is that you have to love the art. "Once you love this stuff, you will be able to take a lot more pain and frustration in your art. You will be able to discipline yourself and your mind."

He rates this as the prime requirement, followed by having a good teacher. "No matter how much you love it, if there is nobody to teach you, then there is no result."

Chen also acknowledged that the student has to have the right conditions to learn. "It is difficult to learn if you have other responsibilities and little time to practice. Other people have to understand and cooperate so that you can practice. This doesn't come easy. You have to put the time in. There is no magic and no short cut."●