

Shi San Shi: The Thirteen Powers by Sam Masich

Problems in presenting and learning the Shi San Shi

A botanist is assigned to report on all the plants along a pathway through a forest. But he finds each species of flora so fascinating that he loses himself in deep contemplation of the first few he encounters and never completes his assigned task. He wanders far into the forest, far from the original trail, absorbed in the observation of plants that are only peripheral to his assignment. He has wandered off the path and must find his way back.

There are inherent difficulties in presenting any kind of holistic concept. It is often difficult to see the forest for the trees. Frequently Tai Chi players become so engrossed in the practice of a single energy, drill or skill, as to miss the contextual relevance of their exploration. Contemporary players often limit their focus to a few drills, usually a solo barehand routine or two, a few basic push hands drills, fixed step freestyle push hands and perhaps Tai Chi straight sword. Limiting the training syllabus in this way leads to erroneous conceptions of the art and makes difficult the thorough integration of the *Shi San Shi*. One factor in this problem is lack of information and instruction, though often, even when excellent instructors make themselves available, students do not work hard enough or think hard enough on the problems of Tai Chi. This leads to an amplification of habits and preferences developed around practitioners' personal advantages and/or limitations. In push hands for example, taller persons frequently develop skills based on out-ranging or 'distancing' practice partners, while strong, short individuals often tend to bulldog their way through situations. Smaller or weaker practitioners on the other hand can develop evasive, 'slippery' styles. By default, strong people generally develop forceful strategies and the naturally quick use speed. Tai Chi players who build their practice around advantage, limitation, or preference rarely experience much of what the art really has to offer and skill development frequently occurs in ways that are contrary, divergent, or at best, parallel to the central nature of the original study.

It is important from the outset, to present large ideas in such a way as to simultaneously advance both depth and breadth understanding. While each facet of the *Shi San Shi* concept must be presented in its minuteness, this must be done in such a way as to maintain a sense of relevance to the overall theory. If not, the premise will be lost and the art deteriorates into a grab-bag of disconnected detail, rather than functioning as a microcosmic repository of the larger Tai Chi principle. Trying to communicate these concepts through phonetic Latin languages is a difficult task due to the

inherently linear constraints of these linguistic forms. Concepts which can be expressed in a single character in Chinese sometimes require paragraphs or pages of explanation in English. It is as much the responsibility of the student as the teacher to keep in mind that each color of the spectrum belongs to an arching rainbow refracted from a purer light.

The *Shi San Shi* are learned by a process of corporealization. To be fully understood they must be embodied, experienced and employed. The paradox however, is that to meaningfully train the traditional conditioning drills and skills which engrain the *Shi San Shi*, a strong instinctive sense of the gist and purpose of these exercises must already be in the practitioner's mind to some degree. The novice must somehow

intuitively possess something of the veteran's sense of the overall concept. Occasionally a student comes along that immediately 'gets it' but these individuals are few and far between, and this provides little comfort or encouragement for the rest of us who must patiently wrestle with the often paradoxical and seemingly contradictory nature of Taijiquan's theory. While the *Shi San Shi* must ultimately be internalized in order to be apprehended, an intellectual understanding of the overall theory is at least a partial remedy for this problem.

I strongly suggest reading this material several times and in several ways. Study it first as a conceptual whole. Later consider individual topics for reflection through practice. Explore it also in random sequence, working to construct the connections between elements which seem to relate. Working this way will assist the process which leads toward the 'one feel', the unification of the Thirteen Powers that a master Tai Chi practitioner embodies.

What are the Shi San Shi?

The *Shi San Shi* or 'Thirteen Powers' are universally regarded as the energetic and conceptual core of Taijiquan training. They are considered to be the source of all stylistic variations of Tai Chi and the universal key which unlocks the secret of all Taijiquan. It is said that without *Shi San Shi* at the root, one's art cannot be called Taijiquan. The *Shi San Shi* consist of thirteen specific power qualities used in martial arts. These are broken into two main categories, the first of which contains eight components associated with the structure and operation arms and hands. These are called *Peng, Lü, Ji, An and Cai, Lie, Zhou, Kao* (Ward-off, Roll-back, Press, Push and Pull-down, Split, Elbow, Shoulder). The second category contains five components which relate to the structure and operation of the legs and feet. These are called *Jin Bu, Tui Bu, Zou Gu, You Pan and Zhong Ding* (Advance Step, Retreat Step, Left-side Gazing, Right-side Looking and Central Settling). The theory is not fanciful. It supports a reasoned and practical methodology for adroitly managing the dynamics of interaction within a specific range of hand combat. In the *Song of Sparring* attributed to Wu Chengqing the importance of the *Shi San Shi* is emphasized:

*"Be serious in the practice of Peng, Lü, Ji, An.
In Cai, Lie, Zhou, Kao pay attention to bending and extending.
In Jin Bu, Tui Bu, Zou Gu, You Pan, Zhong Ding,
You must stick, connect, adhere and follow, distinguishing full and empty."*

'*Shi San*' simply means 'thirteen'. This is an auspicious number in Chinese culture particularly as it is the sum of eight and five. These numbers are related to the *Ba Gua* (Eight Trigrams) and the *Wu Xing* (Five Phases) which have functioned as conceptual cornerstones in the Chinese view of cosmology for millenia. Having provided the structural underpinning for many important theoretical models, the *Ba Gua* and *Wu Xing* have served to assist in the organization of abstract concepts in such disparate fields of knowledge as medicine, religion, philosophy, visual arts, music, and the martial arts. In Taijiquan the *Ba Gua* and *Wu Xing* are related to the *Ba Men* (Eight Gates. aka. *Ba Jin* Eight Energies) and the *Wu Bu* (Five Steps) which refer to the naturally occurring strengths of the arms and legs respectively.

'*Shi*', generally anglicized as 'postures' (as in 'the Thirteen Postures'), is a more difficult term to adequately translate. The Chinese character is comprised of *yi* (agriculture) over *li* (power, strength or force). This refers to the kind of strengths

and forces employed in farmwork, lifting, hoeing, plucking, pulling, tying, squatting and so on. *Shi* also means 'influence' as in, a physical force which influences circumstances. A closely related character, again containing the word 'agriculture', is *yi* which means skill, craftsmanship or art. This *yi* is used in many terms referring to the use of specialized skills including, *wuyi* (martial skill), and *Liu Yi* (the classical Six Arts: rites, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, mathematics). Thus the *Shi* are the powers, forces and strengths inherently developed in the acquisition of a skill. They are the elements of deft craftsmanship in an art and the kinetic potency which accompanies the 'knack'. A way to think about 'farming strength' in terms of martial arts is to consider the old time boxer who goes home to the farm at harvest time in preparation for an upcoming bout. Tossing and stacking huge bales of hay, he trains his muscles for the endurance, strength and large heaving swinging actions of his pugilistic goal.

Shi used in conjunction with the word *zi* (appearance). *Zishi* does actually mean 'posture' but this does not quite summarize the intended meaning for Tai Chi purposes. Another set of meanings for *Shi* however, includes 'situation', 'state of affairs' and 'circumstance'. These notions of intrinsic condition guide inquiry toward the presence of the latent, innate potencies concealed within an object, structure, or action.

Taken together, these two notions of *Shi*, innate 'strength' and inner 'state of affairs', perfectly convey the sense of intention in Taijiquan's use of this character. Taken literally *Shi* refers to the kinetic strengths and skills inherently developed while performing the tasks of a farmer. In the context of Taijiquan the reference is toward the strength, skill and potential for influence which reside inherently in the arms and legs for use in the kind of circumstances for which Taijiquan is practiced. This leans a little closer to the notion of 'posture' in the sense of; 'the intrinsic powers and potentials which reside innately in the arm and leg structures ('postures'), and which spontaneously occur in the context of the mid-range in hand combat'.

Shi San Shi and the 'mid-range'

The Thirteen Powers theory deals primarily with the inherent dynamics of hand combat situations which involve a struggle for control of the 'mid-range'. As such it enjoys an almost exclusive status amongst martial arts theories, as few styles have evolved which build their approach from the mid-range.

Shi San Shi is the foundation and *raison d'être* for virtually all of Taijiquan's solo and partner forms as well as for its renowned martial strategies which employ a wide array of specialized *jin* (kinetic force energies). Tai Chi's unique approach to body positioning, structural alignment, and the use of *qi* (vital energy) is known for providing vibrant health benefits. What is less known is that all of these methods stem from the *Shi San Shi* martial theory.

Taijiquan's theory of mid-range hand combat

Martial arts styles can almost be defined by their predominant focus on a particular range. Styles such as Shaolin Changquan, Shotokan Karate and Tae Kwon Do focus on long, outside-range punching and kicking, whereas inside to ground range grappling arts include Shui Jiao, Jiu Jitsu, Judo, Roman-Greco and Freestyle

Wrestling. Taijiquan's formal training methods focus predominantly on the mid-ranged grappling skills of push hands. The mid-range itself is defined by a positioning between opponents which allows either's hands to reach the other's torso without need of stepping or lunging, but by enough distance between each other as to prevent close body to body contact. This is the sphere of interaction predominantly dealt with in Taijiquan's *Shi San Shi* theory. It is a range shared by arts such as Wing Chun, Aikido and to some extent Xingyiquan, Bagazhang. In Tai Chi however, this range is characterized more by a sticking, jostling kind of grappling than by disconnected punching or overt joint locks. Ultimately, Taijiquan utilizes all distance ranges and includes skills of punching, kicking, throwing and locking in its arsenal, but it approaches these elements in a unique way.

Tai Chi martial arts training begins with a thorough and detailed study of mid-ranged grappling via push hands drills which have been designed according to the Thirteen Powers theory. A main purpose of these exercises is to assist the practitioner in developing special abilities derived from a maximized sense structural integrity and movement efficiency. Simultaneously the practitioner cultivates abilities to influence other's stability and security to the degree that in a situation of combat opponents cannot express their power effectively or defend themselves successfully. As the ability for this kind of control increases within the mid-range, these principles and tactics are translated into the context of other ranges and skills. In this way push hands training is employed as a model and point of departure for techniques of all varieties.

Taijiquan's theory is based on the observation that, since all threatening contact must pass through the mid-range, it is at this axis that one should commence and focus training. This is not to say that Taijiquan theory devalues the extreme outer and inner ranges or discourages their study, but rather that it approaches these ranges progressively, from the prerequisite of having first mastered the pivotal mid-range. True to its most basic tenets, Tai Chi moves from the central out to the periphery.

The advantage of this approach is that it enables Taijiquan martial artists to build their defensive and offensive strategies from the actual axis of engagement, thus avoiding the development of certain habits which can become engrained by a preliminary focus on extreme ranges. To concentrate initially or excessively on the long range can lead to the cultivation of a somewhat pre-emptive, anticipatory, attack oriented style, constructed around hand-eye coordination, speed and power. Conversely, to apply one's energies predominantly to study of the closest ranges can lead to a tendency to wait excessively in defense, resulting in a forced over commitment to tight engagement with the opponent and a frequent necessity for ground fighting. Both range extremes favor youth, quickness, size and strength, and both commonly lead to training injuries as actions are frequently forced past safe limits by the urgency of circumstances.

As a method which first cultivates connection in order to control the opponent through dominance in the mid-range, Taijiquan's approach provides an alternative avenue toward the study of extreme ranges. While this path may seem somewhat indirect compared to more conventional martial arts approaches, in the long term it requires less in the way of speed and power and generates relatively fewer injuries. Almost anyone, regardless of their physical characteristics, can eventually excel in

this type of martial arts training, and continue well into their senior years, assured that the practices will improve, not deteriorate their physical condition.

The study of the mid-range in Taijiquan begins with mid-range grappling (via push hands training) which is at first very soft and fluid in nature. In time this evolves into a kind of controlled jostling which leads to explosive 'strike-pushing' methods and later to full out striking techniques. These skills are all built upon the initial mastery of mid-range grappling techniques derived from the vital *Peng, Lü, Ji, An, Cai, Lie, Zhou, Kao* based drills. It is as a result of this evolution that technique naturally progresses from the mid to the mid-outside and outside sparring ranges. Conversely, mastery of the mid-range allows controlled access to the closer mid-inside, inside and ground grappling ranges and its principles are directly applicable to the other ranges. This cannot be said of the extreme ranges which find themselves at a loss when matching skills derived from their polar counterparts. Whereas most martial arts styles seem determined to avoid the mid-range, and instead focus on only one or two of the other ranges, Taijiquan enthusiastically invites connection in the mid-range and seeks the entire sphere from its axis. Herein lays much of the secret of the Thirteen Powers.