

Yang Family, Yang Style

by Sam Masich

Frequently I am asked questions about the curriculum of Yang Style Taijiquan. What does it include? Why do some schools include material that others don't? Why are some practices considered legitimate by some teachers but not by others? In order to understand the variances in curriculum from school to school it is first necessary to understand a few historical factors relating to the creation of this branch of Taijiquan as well as the opinions of the Yang family itself.

In 1990 I had the fortune of riding with master *Yang Zhenduo* from Winchester, Virginia to Washington D.C. in a van filled with Tai Chi players. We were all going to the Smithsonian institute and to see the sights. It was a sunny day and everyone in the vehicle was in very good spirit after an intense, upbeat five-day workshop. The mood was relaxed and, as I was sitting close to Master Yang and his translator, I took the opportunity to ask some questions about his life in China, his impressions of America, his training and his views on Tai Chi. At some point I came to the subject of curriculum and asked him, among other things, what he thought about the 88 movement Yang Style Taijiquan San Shou (Sparring) routine. Master Yang said, "This is Yang *Style* Taijiquan not Yang *Family* Taijiquan." He went on further to explain that this was the creation of his fathers' students and that, while it adhered well to the principles of his father's teachings, it was not to be considered part of the Yang *Family* Taijiquan.

In Shanghai in 1994, *Madame Wang Jurong* arranged that I might take *Master Fu Zhongwen* for what turned out to be a lengthy lunch in Master Fu's favourite restaurant. I was invited to ask Master Fu any questions I wished and on the topic of the 88 sparring and other questionable routines he concurred with Master Yang Zhenduo. He added that the particular students that created these forms also changed many details in the Taijiquan they had learned from Master Yang Chengfu and that, while their skills were of a very high level, their styles could not be considered truly Yang family but only Yang family in influence. He added however that some of these routines and variations, although he himself did not practice them, could be valuable to students.

The Yang family's Taijiquan; 'Yang Family Taijiquan'; 'Yang Style Taijiquan'.

There is a difference between the historical Taijiquan of the Yang family *as a whole* and what is commonly currently referred to as *Yang Family Taijiquan*.

The Yang family's history with Taijiquan includes the methods developed by *Yang Lucan* (1799-1872), his sons *Yang Jianhou* and *Yang Banhou* his grandsons *Yang Chengfu* and *Yang Shaohou* as well and his great grandson's

Yang Shouzhong, Yang Zhenji, Yang Zhenduo and his great, great, great grandson *Yang Jun*. When taken in aggregate the Yang's family history with Taijiquan includes a vast range of variations and approaches as each of the first three generations made great modifications with the material passed down by their predecessors. In modern times it is impossible to truly understand the full historical art of the Yang's family since there is little record of the practices of the first two generations. The Yang's family tree has produced innumerable branches and stems.

Today, *Yang Family Taijiquan* as it is commonly conceived, is based on the Taijiquan of *Yang Chengfu* (1883-1936), who popularized the art throughout the 1920's and 30's. The solo routine variation of his approach is characterized by large, continuous rolling movements, steady in pace and rounded in shape. Yang Chengfu's direct descendants, as well as his nephew *Fu Zhongwen* (and Fu's son *Fu Shenyuan* and grandson *James Fu*) are the inheritors of Yang Family Taijiquan. Direct students of these individuals, it may be said, are students of Yang Family Taijiquan. This may be also said of any students in the lineage of the aforementioned Yang family members (if there have not been significant alterations or variations of the material and curriculum of these teachers). It should be noted that while there is some variation in style and emphasis within the first layer of Yang family teachers, differences are relatively minor and often based on personal preference.

It may, at first glance, appear that practitioners of Yang *Family* Taijiquan are limited only to actual members of the Yang family (and their students) because of the direct family relationship. While there may be some truth to this, hereditary inheritance is only part of the picture. More importantly, the difference between Yang *Family* and Yang *Style* Taijiquan has to do with actual curriculums of training.

To understand what constitutes *Yang Style Taijiquan* it is important first to realize that there is no single approach to this subject. Essentially the difference has to do with practices added to the basic curriculum by students of the Yang family. These practices are usually special training exercises or routines designed to augment or supplement the received material, but may even include auxiliary training outside the strict parameters of what normally constitutes Taijiquan practice. Examples of special exercises might include simplified, re-choreographed or tempo altered form variations, preparatory push hands or weapons drills or entirely new routines based on the flavour and characteristics of Yang Family Taijiquan. Auxiliary training could be anything from qigong, stance and strength training to specialized sparring or healing practices.

Some teachers will have supplemented material from their teachers with drills from other instructors. They may formalize these teachings, absorbing them into their curriculum (thus creating new variations of Yang Style), or they may pass these materials down informally, often to avoid disrespecting an earlier master. Still others will use their experience and imagination to develop original material in order to communicate Tai Chi principles more effectively in an attempt to advance the work of former masters. Early Yang Style Taijiquan pioneers include direct students of the Yang family such as *Dong Yingjie*, *Chen Weiming*, *Chen Yenlin* and *Zheng Manjing*, each of whom developed original material and put a distinctive stylistic stamp on the material they received from Yang Chengfu. These teachers added significantly to both the body of material and the international appeal of the art.

Contemplating what defines Yang Style Taijiquan often sheds interesting light on the somewhat purist idea of Yang Family Taijiquan. For example: There is substantial evidence indicating that the creation of the Yang Family Taiji sabre and sword routines were undertaken by *Fu Zhongwen* and *Chen Weiming* respectively and not passed down from earlier Yang family members. Both weapons forms have been adopted by the Yang family as standard to the Yang Family Taijiquan curriculum. If this is true then a number of questions arise:

- *Is Yang Family Taijiquan also a collective creation of both Yang family members and students of Yang Chengfu?*
- *If so, where is the line to be drawn defining that which is authentically Yang 'Family' Taijiquan and that which is Yang 'Style' Taijiquan?*
- *Can a practitioner be a student of both Yang Family Taijiquan and Yang Style Taijiquan simultaneously under the same instructor?*
- *Given that these major developments are all about seventy years old, what does 'traditional' mean in reference to Yang Family or Yang Style Taijiquan?*

Sam's Yang Style Taijiquan

To follow is my teaching curriculum for Yang Style Taijiquan. Beside each syllabus item I include a designation for what what might is considered to be Yang Style Taijiquan (**YS**). Practices which may fall into both Yang Style and Yang Family will be designated (**YSF**). There is no designation for exclusively Yang Family material since anything in this curriculum is also included in Yang Style Taijiquan. Please bear in mind, that while *Yang Style* includes everything in *Yang Family*, not everything that is considered by other instructors to be Yang Style Taijiquan is represented here (eg. Yang style Taiji

Staff, Fan, Cane, Double Sword etc.).

1) Qigong for Yang Style Taijiquan

(YS) Standing Post

(YS) Stationary Posture

(YS) Taiji Qigong

(YS)* Taiji Breath Placement

(YS) Taiji Gong Li (strength, flexibility and conditioning training)

2) Yang Style Taijiquan solo bare hand routine

(YSF) 108 Yang Style Taijiquan solo form

3) Yang Style Taijiquan Push Hands

(YS) Eight preparatory Push Hands exercises (1-8) (+ mix of drills)

-note: exercise number one and sometimes two are used in Yang Family Taijiquan

Four Hands (Si Zheng Tui Shou)

(YSF) Fixed Step

(YS)* Eight directional changes

(YSF) Fixed Step freestyle

(YSF) Moving Step (Follow, Cover Steps)

(YS) Moving Step (Circular Steps)

(YS)* Moving Step Leg Changes

(YSF) Moving Step freestyle

Large Rolling (Da Lu)

(YSF) Da Lu diagonal orientation

(YS) Da Lu square orientation

(YS) Da Lu variations and freestyle

4) Free sparring (San Shou)

(YS) Yang Style Taijiquan Applications form (88) and mix

(YS) Solo form applications

(YS)* Fighting Range theory and training

(YSF) Push Hands Sparring

(YSF) Free Sparring

5) Yang Style Taijidao (Sabre)

(YSF) Sabre form 1 (Fu Zhongwen variation)

(YS) Sabre form 2 (Chen Yenlin variation)
(YS)* Sabre sparring drills
(YSF) Sabre two person routine 1 (8 movements)
(YSF) Sabre Free Sparring

6) *Yang Style Taijijian (Sword)*

(YSF) Straight sword form (Chen Weiming & Fu Zhongwen variations differ slightly, I prefer to teach the former)
(YS) Straight sword two person drills
(YSF) Straight sword free sparring

7) *Yang Style Taijiqiang (Spear)*

(YSF) Spear solo training
(YSF) Binding spear training
(YSF) Spear Free Sparring

* *My own innovation*

The balance between tradition and innovation has always been a shaky one in the Asian martial arts world. As modern technology allows large and influential organizations to form around prominent instructors, I feel it is vital that we as a general community take a larger view of our practices and their historical contexts in order to avoid the risk of losing important developments and traditions to the forces of populism. While each teacher draws an individual line as to what he or she considers to fall within the scope of their art, it is important to remember that nothing in Taijiquan was developed in a vacuum. No one historical period has been more significant than any other as far as the art's development has been concerned. Taijiquan will continue to grow, mature and benefit society so long as it remains inclusive rather than exclusive.