

Taiji Quan and Zhang “Fist” and “Palm”

A few comments from the Yang and Dong traditions

By Chip Ellis

The Fist

Many practitioners of martial arts make their fist by closing the fingers and then “locking” the index and middle fingers with a bent thumb.



This is the fist typically seen in Japanese Karate and many forms of Chinese Wushu. However, it is **NOT** the fist used in the Yang and Dong traditions of Taijiquan.

When Dong Hu Ling taught us in Honolulu, he used a fist made by closing the fingers and then bending the thumb so that the tip of the thumb just touched the top of the middle knuckle of the index finger. The thumb did not close over the fingers, nor did it stick out. Rather, it stayed on the top of the formation to create a smooth transition with the bent fingers, so that there was nothing to “catch”.

For years I wondered about this fist. Why was it formed thus, and what was it’s tradition?

The oldest pictures of that form of the fist I can find are those of Yang Cheng Fu from about 1931. If you look closely, you can see that he uses the fist as taught to us by Dong Hu Ling.



A number of years ago I saw a very clear enlarged picture of Wu Chien Chuan in a posture in which he held a fist. That fist also was of the same structure. And finally, the 1948 pictures of Dong Hu Ling's father, Dong Ying Jie, also show the same fist formation.



So it appears clear to me that historically the Yang and Dong families used this form of the fist in their practice of Taijiquan. This fist is still taught to us by the Dong family today.

Now to the question of “why”. Dong Hu Ling's answer to me when I asked, was that the fist thus made was not “locked”, and so it allowed for a smoother flow of chi through it. I would encourage the reader to try both fist structures to see if they can feel the difference.

Years later I had a more practical experience that led me to further conclusions: Dong Zeng Chen and I regularly practiced push hands together at his house. Because we were both very familiar with each other, our level of mutual trust and energy was quite high. If you saw us from afar often you might think that we were engaged in a fight, perhaps not that friendly.

In the early years we made circles and used many of the standard hand and arm techniques that are present in the Yang and Dong style sets. As time progressed our techniques broadened to encompass those of the feet – trips, traps, pulls, and an occasional well placed kick. These were dangerous, and I would not do them with any but my closest colleagues for fear of injury to myself or my partner.

Finally my teacher and I added the fist to the arsenal as we “played”. I must tell you that this new weapon added quite another dimension to the game. The power of the fist was immediately apparent, and it was to be taken seriously. Of course, we did not hit each other hard, but the threat was definitely there.

In the process of learning to use my fists in our practice I came to the following conclusions. They are mine, so please excuse me if I have misunderstood or have erred

in my understanding. Two significant characteristics of this formation of the Taiji Fist came to my mind.

The first was that it was faster to make. In other words, one could make the Taiji Fist in one movement, simultaneously closing the fingers and the thumb into the proper position all at once. This was very quick. You could go from an open hand to a fist in the blink of an eye. As we engaged in our play I was able to instantly change from palm to fist and back again. This was very useful.





It seems to me that you can make the Taiji Fist faster than the other form of the fist because the latter must be made in two separate movements: a) first you close the fingers, then b) you lock the fingers with the thumb. Try it and draw your own conclusion.

The second characteristic was that the Taiji Fist was less likely to be caught and twisted, since there is no thumb sticking out. In the other form of the fist the thumb protrudes as it covers the first two fingers. In that configuration a skilled (or lucky) opponent could possibly grab your thumb and bend or break it painfully. Or you might catch your thumb on a piece of clothing or something else. This could be a potential disadvantage in a fight.

Interestingly, the Dong family don't always use this "smooth" form of the Taiji Fist. In their "hard" qigong practice the fist they use is the other one, with the fist covering the first two fingers. But that is a different art.

The Palm or open hand

The form of the palm as seen in the Yang slow set as taught by the Dong family has some variation between teachers. It appears to me that the open hand in the Taijiquan set displays more expression of the individual's energy and personality.

Yang Cheng Fu	Dong Ying Jie
	
Dong Hu Ling	Dong Zeng Chen
	

When you examine the old films and still pictures of Dong Ying Jie you will see that his palm form consists of straight fingers which are close together, with the thumb slightly bent and fairly close to the palm.

When I first noticed this difference, for Dong Hu Ling's hands did not look like that, I tried doing the set with this older style structure. To me, the change in hand formation made a big difference in the feeling of the set. The whole thing seemed more direct and martial.

By contrast, Dong Hu Ling's open hand had fingers that were somewhat bent and a bit more separated. The thumb was widely (but loosely) separated from the palm so that it protruded. The overall shape resembled what it would look like if you were holding a large basketball in both hands, ready to pass it forward to your team mate. It seemed to me that his open hands were an excellent reflection of his open and flowing style. (In the comparative pictures of Snake Creeps Down above his hand actually is somewhat

different from this more open form. That is because of how he was using his palm in the application.)

Dong Zeng Chen's hands appear wider yet. The fingers are more bent than his father's and more separated, one from the other. And the thumb protrudes with more energy. The whole hand seems to have more active energy. Take a look at his left hand in the image of him doing Snake Creeps Down (below) and you will see what I am talking about. This shape too fits his personality and style.



So here you have three experts with three somewhat different open hand forms. Yet all three had the same fist style. It appears that there is more room for individual expression in the open hand structure.

That said, the application of energy through the palm was not different. Both Dong Hu Ling and Dong Zeng Chen taught me the same ways to locate or direct the energy in the open palms.

In the two hand front push, "An", the energy in the palm is located near the center of the base of the palm, the "heel" of the palm. Dong Hu Ling told me that when you are first learning, the energy covers most of the palm, but as you improve the energy becomes more concentrated toward the center of the heel of your palm. He demonstrated by drawing a circle on his palm that was about one inch in diameter. Dong Zeng Chen taught me the same thing.

The left hand in the move "Dan Bien" or "Single Whip" has the energy concentrated more toward the knife edge of the left hand. It is about one inch from the edge of the palm rather than on the edge itself. This is because the strike or push you are making is with a slanted hand relative to the direction of movement. Both father and son taught this same placement of the energy in the palm.

Below is a comparative of Diagonal Single Whip. While camera angles make it somewhat difficult to accurately characterize the movement, it seems to me that Yang Chen Fu's left hand is higher and his body more upright, leading to a palm which faces front more with the energy more toward the base of the palm. It seems to me from the picture that Dong Ying Jie's left hand is lower, and his body is leaning forward slightly, so the energy in his palm is more toward the knife edge. From this you can see how subtle variations in body position can have a significant effect on the expression in the palm.

Yang Cheng Fu	Dong Ying Jie
 A black and white photograph of Yang Cheng Fu, a prominent Taijiquan master. He is shown from the waist up, wearing a dark, traditional Chinese jacket. His right arm is extended horizontally to the left, and his left hand is held near his chest with fingers slightly spread. He has a mustache and is looking towards the camera.	 A black and white photograph of Dong Ying Jie, another Taijiquan master. He is shown from the waist up, wearing a dark, traditional Chinese jacket. His right arm is extended horizontally to the left, and his left hand is held near his chest with fingers slightly spread. He has a shaved head and is looking towards the camera.

That said, I encourage you to play with the palm shapes and locations of energy in your hands as you practice. Try out different ways and see how they feel and what they do to your performance.

March 18, 2005