

# The Five Families/Styles of Tai Chi Chuan

I hope you will at least be able to appreciate now that there is no one universal style of tai chi chuan.

There are five major recognised styles of tai chi chuan which are as follows:

1. Chen style
2. Yang style
3. Sun style
4. Wu style
5. Wu/hao style

There are also other styles which are all derived from the above e.g., Cheng Man Ching.

All formal styles of tai chi should adhere to the principles set out in the “Tai Chi Classics.”

## Chen Style

The Chen family style is the oldest and parent form of the five main tai chi chuan styles. It is third in terms of worldwide popularity compared to the other main tai chi chuan styles. Chen style is characterized by its lower stances, more explicit Silk reeling and bursts of power (fa jin).

The origin and nature of tai chi is not historically verifiable at all until around the 17th century when the Chen clan of Chenjiagou (Chen Village, Henan province, China) appear identified as possessing a unique martial arts system. The Chen family came to practise their unique style is not clear due to lack of documentation from the formative period and irreconcilable views on the matter abound. What is known is that the other four modern orthodox family styles of tai chi chuan are traced to the teachings in the Chen family village in the early 19th century.

## Sun Style

The Sun style tai chi chuan was developed by Sun Lutang (1861-1932), who was considered expert in two other internal martial arts styles: xingyiquan and baguazhang before he came to study tai chi chuan. Today, Sun style ranks fourth in popularity and fifth in terms of seniority among the five family styles of tai chi chuan. He was also considered an accomplished Neo-Confucian and Taoist scholar, especially in the Yi Jing and the Tai chi classics. Sun learned Wu/Hao style tai chi chuan from Hao Weizhen, who was Li Yiyu's chief disciple.

Sun style tai chi chuan is well known for its smooth, flowing movements which omit the more physically vigorous crouching, leaping and fa jin of some other styles. The footwork of Sun style is unique, when one foot advances or retreats the other follows. It also uses an open palm throughout the entirety of its main form, and exhibits small circular movements with the hand. Its gentle postures and high stances make it very suitable for geriatric exercise and martial arts therapy.

## Yang Style

Yang family-style in its many variations is the most popular and widely practised style in the world today and the second in terms of seniority among the primary five family styles of tai chi chuan.

The Yang family first became involved in the study of tai chi ch'uan in the early 19th century. The founder of the Yang-style was Yang Lu-ch'an (1799–1872), who studied under Ch'en Chang-hsing starting in 1820. Yang became a teacher in his own right, and his subsequent expression of tai chi chuan became known as the Yang-style. Yang Lu-ch'an (and some would say the art of tai chi chuan, in general) came to prominence as a result of his being hired by the Chinese Imperial family to teach tai chi chuan to the elite Palace Battalion of the Imperial Guards in 1850, a position he held until his death.

## Wu Style

The Wu family style of Wu Ch'uan-yu (Wu Quanyuo) and Wu Chien-ch'üan (Wu Jianquan) is the second most popular form of t'ai chi ch'uan in the world today, after the Yang style and fourth in terms of family seniority. This style is different from the Wu style of t'ai chi ch'uan founded by Wu Yu-hsiang. While the names are distinct in pronunciation and the Chinese characters used to write them are different, they are often romanized the same way.

Wu Ch'uan-yu (1834–1902) was a military officer cadet of Manchu ancestry in the Yellow Banner camp in the Forbidden City, Beijing and also a hereditary officer of the Imperial Guards Brigade. At that time, Yang Lu-ch'an (1799–1872) was the martial arts instructor in the Imperial Guards, teaching t'ai chi ch'uan, and in 1850 Wu Ch'uan-yu became one of his students.

The Wu style's distinctive hand form, pushing hands and weapons trainings emphasize parallel footwork and horse stance training with the feet relatively closer together than the modern Yang or Chen styles, small circle hand techniques (although large circle techniques are trained as well) and differs from the other t'ai chi family styles martially with Wu style's initial focus on grappling, throws (shuai chiao), tumbling, jumping, foot sweeps, pressure point leverage and joint locks and breaks, which are trained in addition to more conventional t'ai chi sparring and fencing at advanced levels.

## Hao Style

The Wu or Wu (Hao) style of t'ai chi ch'uan of Wu Yu-hsiang (1813-1880), is a separate family style from the more popular Wu style of Wu Chien-ch'üan. Wu Yu-hsiang's style was third among the five t'ai chi ch'uan families in seniority and is fifth in terms of popularity.

Wu Yu-hsiang's t'ai chi ch'uan is a distinctive style with small, subtle movements; highly focused on balance, sensitivity and internal ch'i development. It is a rare style today, especially compared with the other major styles. While there are direct descendants of Li I-yü and Li Ch'i-hsüan still teaching in China, there are no longer Hao family members teaching the style. The last inheritor to learn under Hao Shao-ju currently living is Liu Jishun, who has many students around the globe.