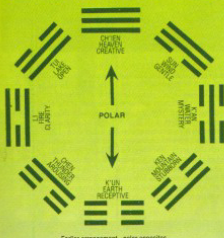


POSITIONING IN THE MARTIAL ARTS



By Adrian Chan-Waiye Ph.D.

All great masters of the martial arts – regardless of tradition or country – have one essential attribute in common: positioning. Positioning, as it relates to all levels of existence (spiritual, psychological and the physical), is what distinguishes these people from the ordinary. Their timing, precision and grace are not just effortless, but have an “otherworldliness” about them. When the master moves, the movement invariably pre-emptes that of the opponent. Despite moving first, the opponent always arrives last. This is a power that no forcefulness can overcome. Why is it that an opponent cannot beat the master? And how did the master get to be like this in the first place? The answer involves depth of study and breadth of experience.

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The essence of change is the essence of being. One cannot exist without the other. In China, we have the three well-known and greatly respected internal styles of Xingyi (Jingzhen Boxing 形意), Bagua Zhang (Eight Diagram Palm 八卦), and Taiji Quan (Supreme Ultimate Fist 太極). But do these fighting concepts have in common? They are all found in the *Yijing* (Book of Changes 易經). Change is the basis of life. The essence of Change is a peaceful stillness. In this stillness, all movement evolves, manifests and recedes back into the void. The internal master is at one with this process.

The Triad of Existence

The *Yijing* (a.k.a. *I-Ching*) is thousands of years old. Far too often today, this book of old wisdom is treated as some kind of soothsaying device, used for divining the future. But this is a profound misunderstanding of its true purpose. In many ways, the structure of the *Yijing* may be viewed as an ancient computer. The book is nothing short of a work of pure genius. Those who designed its fundamental layers had a deep understanding of the world and how it worked. A basic tenet from the start of its development was the insight that humanity, through its consciousness, was intrinsically linked to the universe. But more than this, consciousness – at its base – WAS the universe. The interaction between universal consciousness and physical matter was mediated by the concept of “Change.” Not only this, but universal consciousness reflected the world, and the physical world was a reflection of the universal consciousness. The space between the two became the area humanity inhabited. The ancient sages denoted universal consciousness as “Heaven,” physical matter as “Earth” and life as “Humanity.” They then placed Earth at the base, from the ground up, life or Humanity above the Earth, with Heaven at the top. Thus was born the basic triad of existence.

The Sixty-Four Hexagrams

As human beings, we are as much “spirit” as we are “matter.” In fact, both exist in human beings in equal measure. Seldom are we born “balanced.” We must refine



Hawk Sweeps Down from Yin Yu Zhang

our inner and outer energy by focusing our minds, regulating our breath and quietly organizing the movement of our torso and limbs. The authors of the *Yijing* used eight symbols to describe the universe. Each symbol (your 卦) is made up of three horizontal lines, each of which can be broken or straight. The ancients then doubled the eight trigrams into eight hexagrams – symbols of six horizontal lines. Heaven was defined by six unbroken lines, whilst Earth was represented by six broken lines. From these eight basic hexagrams a further possible fifty-six hexagrams were formed by moving or exchanging broken lines for straight lines. This system of random precisions created the sixty-four hexagrams that make up the *Yijing* today. Sixty-two hexagrams reflect a condition in human existence, whilst the two others represent physical objects considered culturally important in ancient China – namely the “well” and the “cauldron.”

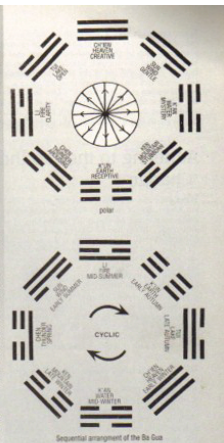
The Well and the Cauldron

The well and the cauldron represent stability and nourishment. From ancient times, human settlements in China needed access to these two very important attributes for survival. Life was generally communal. The cauldron was used to cook food, and of course the well was used for the gathering and storage of water. The ancient sages who wrote the *Yijing* further developed these crucial daily necessities into philosophical assertions. The well, for instance, is ideally located in or near the center of the village or settlement. People constantly take from it, but it is never diminished. Its character is one of nourishment. The water falls from Heaven and is gathered in the well, so that humanity may be nourished. The cauldron, on the other hand, is the symbol of transformation. What goes into it is transformed by the cooking process. The symbol of the cauldron appears in the Chinese ideogram for oil, and there is good reason for this. Unlike the well, which by necessity does not generally move, the cauldron can be moved. The cauldron is the catalyst for inner and outer transformation. Its structure is rounded, like the posture of an internal martial artist.

Taken together, both the symbols of the well and cauldron advise the spiritual seeker and martial artist on how they should develop and transform their character and, by implication, their physical body. The true person, or one who acts in accordance with the highest ideals of the universe (i.e. follows the Tao), draws nourishment from within, as the well draws nourishment from the water that drops from Heaven. By drawing nourishment from within, the true person is then able to nourish what is on the outside – that is, all of humanity. In medical terms, this essentially philosophical process may be described as the “opening” of the qi channels, triggered by the acquired alignment of the physical posture. Energy flows freely in all directions, and there is no hindrance whatsoever. The cauldron also receives nourishment in the form of water, and this water also has its origin in Heaven. Through heating the water, whatever is in the water is transformed into something else. On one level this may be viewed as just simple cooking, but on another, we have a model for spiritual/physical development. The well gathers; the cauldron transforms.

Transformation

The *Yijing* is a manual of physical and spiritual transformation. Those who seek its deep wisdom are looking to transform their inner and outer being. The *Yijing* transforms the mundane into the profound. Meaning is found everywhere. The sixty-four



Sequential arrangement of the Ba Gua



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hexagrams each have a philosophical definition attached to them, regarding whatever aspect of change is being conceived. But more than this, each of the six individual lines that make up any one hexagram also has its own sub-definitions attached. This means that, in theory, any one of the sixty-four hexagrams can transform into any one of the other sixty-three hexagrams. And thus we have a never-ending cycle of “change.” This should not be surprising, as the Chinese ideogram for “change” (yì) is drawn from the character symbolising the chameleon – which has the ability to melt into its chosen environment by changing the color of its skin.

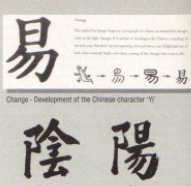
Adhering to the Tao through “Change”

What does this mean for the martial artist? The *Yijing* – the basis for Xingyi, Bagua and Taiji Quan (and all higher Chinese martial and secular arts), advocates an interlocking of space, time AND awareness. In our normal waking state, we tend to view change as one-dimensional, limited in scope and annoying when it is something we did not plan [or welcome or predict. And although we may not be able to predict exactly what may or may not occur, we can – through the study of the Classic of Change – become one with the natural flow of change itself. Once this transformation occurs often referred to as “inner alchemy” in Taoist texts, we are freed to explore change in all its multitudinous varieties. Change no longer becomes a matter of predictability, but rather one of adherence to the Tao. And in the Chinese ideogram for Tao, we find an explanation for how one is to achieve such a balanced state of flow between yin and yang. The ideogram is written so as to depict a scholar (or enlightened person) who walks a path that unites (and adheres to) Heaven and Earth.

Taiji Quan harnesses change through the forward, backward, up and down motions of the body. Bagua harnesses change through the utilization of obvious circles, and Xingyi uses the subtle energy of “rooting through” the circle, giving the deceptive impression of linear movement. However, as always, there is far more going on. The inner process of the body is manifested on the outside of the body through the manipulation of the limbs and placement of the torso. The heart, lungs and intestines fill and empty, the blood vessels contract and relax, the musculature contracts and relaxes. To assist and enhance this process, the outer body is moved in such away as to maximize and improve the functioning of the inner body – thus maximizing health and preventing illness. Muscular tension is the unnecessary trapping of energy in one part of the body. The energy for tension has to come from somewhere, so it is drained from other body systems, notably the immune system. When this happens, our ability to fight disease and to prevent illness is diminished. However, when tension is released through qigong and the forms of the internal arts, it is absorbed back into the immune system, and health is increased as a consequence. The “changes” that occur in the inner body are clarified and exhibited in the external body – a process requiring the type of physical movements found in the internal arts. Such a state of martial endeavor requires that the changes of the outer body reflect the changes of the inner body. These two aspects of change ensure robust health and longevity.

The Extended Scope of Change

But the cultivation of change has one more essential aspect for the martial artist: namely, the harnessing of change in the environment. At the highest level, the internal master is able to act “at one”



Change – Development of the Chinese character ‘Yi’



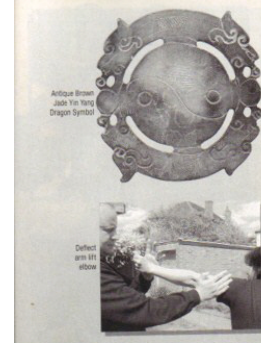
Cannon Pounding from Yin Yu Zhang Short Bagua Form



Hawk Sweeps Down - from Dong Hai Chuan Bagua Zhang



Another movement from Yin Yu Zhang



Antique Bronze Jade Yin Yang Dragon Symbol

with all that occurs in the external environment. The external environment becomes literally an expression of the “Mind,” whereby there is nothing that does not exist outside of awareness. Extended awareness and the concept of change are intrinsically linked. One merely reflects the other.

Structure Versus Free Expression – A Martial Arts Paradox

Change is not just a physical event. In the *Yijing* the psychological perception of change cannot be separated from the physical experience of change. When these two aspects are fully mastered during a lifetime of martial arts practice, one is able to move in all directions, without hindrance. This free movement allows for the full expression of one’s art. At the beginning of one’s training career, free movement invariably means poor coordination, hesitancy and indecision. These problems are overcome by the structure of the various training forms within Chinese martial arts, whether internal or external. The knowledge of how to move, and when to move, replaces the uncertainty that permeates the beginner’s mind. But with certainty comes limitation of expression – this is the paradox of the martial arts. While the martial artist’s developmental journey must begin with certainties, these

essential structures exist only so that the practitioner can — after years of training — transcend ALL structures and the limitations they impose on expression. Structures are, in the beginning, a necessary affliction. For the human being to develop beyond the base ego structure of the mind, direction and striving are required.

Neutralizing Aggressive Energy into Peace

A martial form is an encapsulated history of combat and spiritual development passed down from teacher to student. Every human being experiences events in different ways, and this is why we have the different styles today that have emerged from the experience of inter-human warfare. Remaining a compassionate human being after and perhaps during the experience of war serves as the basis for spiritual development. The *Ying* simply views warfare as an expression of energy at the right time. This is not the denial of the hideous nature of the destructive human endeavour of war but rather an expression of "clear thinking," where energy is purified at its source through constant refinement of observation. This pure energy "neutralizes" aggressive energy into peace. That is the highest expression of spiritually motivated martial arts, whereby war is prevented from perpetuation by withdrawing the negative energy that lies at its foundation. In the hexagram entitled "Conflict" (no. 6) in the *Ying* we read:



Hexagram for Conflict

Heaven and water go their opposite ways.

The image of conflict.

Thus is all transactions the superior man

Carefully considers the beginning.

Warfare is resolved by integrating Heaven (or that which above) with Water (or that which is below). These symbols represent the duality of human existence and

Continued on page 101



Black Lift from Yin Yu Zhang



All Round Defense from Yin Yu Zhang Iron Wolf



Top & Right Evade Strike

Continued from page 90: Positioning in the Martial Arts



Hawk Sweeps Down in Horse Stance from Yin Yu Zhang



Crouching Tiger from Dong Hai Chuan Style Bagua Zhang



Another movement from Dong Hai Chuan

the two branches (or expressions) of Chinese martial arts. It is a matter of character and character development and balance. It is also an expression of *qi* flow and *qi* refinement. Warfare happens on many levels — and not just on the physical. The purpose of martial arts training is to resolve conflict. That is why the "beginning of movement" is considered very carefully. In fact, the beginning of movement becomes the essence of all movement for the martial artist. Not just of physical movement, but also of movement of the mind. Thought is the movement of the mind. As martial artists, we strive to become clear about what lies just before movement begins in the physical body, and what lies just before the manifestation of thought in the mind. In Chinese philosophical thought, the essence of physical movement begins in the mind, which, in its pure state, is a reflection of the universe.

The Sacred Space of Martial Arts

Chinese martial arts are performed in a sacred space. Such is the importance of their practice from a Chinese cultural perspective. This training place is often referred to as a *quan* (館) in Mandarin and is the term used to describe a Taoist temple. Temples of this type exist throughout Asia, wherever the overseas Chinese have settled. Unlike Buddhist temples where the Buddhist scriptures are studied and combined with meditation — and perhaps martial arts practiced as a means to achieve Mind/Body integration and intersection — the Taoist temple concentrates solely on the development, manifestation and refinement of *qi* or energy. Within the Taoist system, there are numerous Gods and Goddesses all representing different parts of the human psyche. *Shen gong* (spirit work, 神功) is the order of the day. Harnessing energy can lead to sorts of unusual physical and psychological abilities. Many practitioners of this art can exhibit the ability to endure extreme physical pain and hardship, or manifest *kung fu* skills where none existed before!

Of course, both Buddhism and Taoism agree that the mind is the doorway to both development and enlightenment.

This leads to an ethereal positioning of mind and body that aligns the universe with the physical environment. To the practitioners such a state resembles standing in a three-dimensional sphere of awareness. This sphere or circle of psycho-physical attainment may well have served as the basis for the foundation of the *qigong* (i.e. the *yin/yang* symbol 陰陽) and the eight *gua* symbols that are arranged around the circle. The eight *gua* were added to the basic two forces of the universe to represent differing aspects of physical existence. As human beings, we constantly make use of the *yin/yang* force, and we routinely move through the situations represented by the eight *gua*. The *Ying* was written around this realization and its philosophy developed to encapsulate it. The internal martial arts of China advocate a superior positioning of mind, body and spirit, united in the essence of the Tao. A true master is never in the wrong position. ☯

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