

The 37 Essential Forms of Taijiquan (level one)

Master Class

with Master Sam Masich
on ZOOM



Level One, Session One Forms and Families

The 37 Essential Forms of Taijiquan

'Essential forms' one of the essential foundations for understanding *taijiquan* as an energetic and martial art. Yang Chengfu, in his 1931 book, 'Taijiquan Method and Application' (*Taijiquan Shiyongfa* 太極拳使用法), states that, "the full long-form sequence above is comprised entirely of thirty-seven distinct forms." He indicates that a more exhaustive explanation would be forthcoming in a later volume. Yang died in 1936 and no such book is known to have been written. This course is intended to provide such an explanation.

1. History

In 1912, Xu Yusheng (許禹生 1878-1945), a student of Yang Jianhou (楊健侯 1839-1917) and his son Yang Chengfu (楊澄甫 1883-1936), established one of the very first modern martial arts schools—the Beijing Physical Education Research Society (*Beijing Tiyu Yanjiushe* 北京體育研究社). This was one of the first institutions to make *taijiquan* available to the general public and still exists today. Xu invited many famous masters, including Yang Chengfu, to teach their *taijiquan* at the facility. Xu and Yang enjoyed a close collaborative association, for example, Xu used drawings based on an early photo-set of the mid-thirties aged Chengfu in his 1921 work, 'Taijiquan Postures Illustrated' and appears with Yang demonstrating push-hands in the same photo shoot. In his book, Xu relays information about a Tang Dynasty (618-906) poet and recluse, Xu Xuanping (許宣平), who taught martial arts purely on the basis of thirty-seven essential forms.



"Xu often carried firewood to sell in the marketplace, chanting to himself:

*By the dawn to sell I carry firewood
So I can buy wine for today and return at dusk
Ask me please, where is my home?
Penetrate the clouds and enter the emerald hillside*



Xu passed on a *taiji* boxing method called 'Thirty-Seven'. The reason is, it had only thirty-seven named forms. *His method of instruction was single-form training. He'd make the student train each form until it was correct, then he would reward the student with the next form. There was no fixed boxing method.*

Successful achievement would come from one's own ability to link up the forms coherently, one after another, unceasingly. Therefore it could be called 'Long Boxing' (Chángquán 長拳)."

2. Forms

The Chinese word *shi* (式) means 'style', 'form' or 'pattern'. *Shi* is most often translated as 'movement' or 'posture', as in, 'Beijing 24 Movement Taijiquan' (北京二十四式太極拳). It is also sometimes rendered as 'step', for example, '32-Step Taiji Sword' (三十二式太極劍). *Shi* in this respect refers to the countable 'forms', 'moves' or 'postures' in a sequence.

Shi is sometimes used in the naming of individual 'postures' such as, 'raise hands, step-up form' (*ti shou shang shi* 提手上式) and 'diagonal flying form' (*xie fei shi* 斜飛式). In this sense, all postures are considered to be *shi*. *Shi* (式) is often confused, and used interchangeably, with another important *taijiquan* word, *shi* (勢), which means 'power', 'force' or 'influence' and is used in the term '*shisan shi*, or 'thirteen powers' (十三勢). The apparent interchangeability of these terms as presented by different authors can lead to confusion.

Shi (式) is also used in naming *taijiquan* 'styles' (e.g., Yang-style or *Yang-shi taijiquan* 楊式太極拳). Styles are also referred to as 'families' (家), as also as a reference to the Chinese clans/families that originated the early variants of the art (i.e. *Chen-jia taijiquan* 陳家太極拳).

Essential Forms

'Essential forms' are the archetypal, irreducible elements within a *taijiquan* set. Often described simply as 'postures', they are the core choreographic materials comprising the larger routine.

In his Yang-style Taijiquan form, Yang Chengfu considered there to be thirty-seven basic building block 'essential forms.' These are assembled together to make up the entire 'set' or 'form' *taolu* (套路). In fact there are between thirty-five and forty individual forms in the Yang-style barehand form. In this matter, however, there is some difference as to what qualifies for counting, as some schools recognize 'opening' and 'closing' as independent forms. The question of whether to count both left and right-style variations could bring the number up to between 50-55).

In most *taijiquan* routines there are repetitions of at least some of the essential forms. 'Wave hands like clouds' which is counted as one of the thirty-seven essential forms making up the long set, can provide an example: In the traditional long Yang solo sequence, 'wave hands like clouds' (*yun shou* 雲手) is repeated, by alternating left and right sides either three or five times (depending on the school) and with this pattern the executed three times throughout the entire sequence, yielding a total of nine or fifteen 'cloud hands.' By its repetition, this one essential form contributes a respectable percentage to the overall count.



3. Holding Single Form Practice Methods

The idea of single-form or 'holding-posture' training predates the notion of forms training probably by millennia and there exist a vast array of practices of this nature. The Yang family and all direct disciples of the family are proponents of these methods. A commonly practiced method, known as 'standing post' (*zhan zhuang* 站樁) advises practitioners to hold the 'horse stance' (*mabu* 馬步) or the 'empty stance' (*xubu* 虛步) for extended periods.

In the 'Tai-Chi Meditation' section of his 1981 *The Tao of Tai-Chi Chuan*, Master Jou Tsung Hwa describes the use of three *shi* from *taijiquan* in *zhan zhuang*. The first, *hun yuan gong* (渾元功) means something like, 'primal-origin training' and refers to holding the *taiji* commencing stance (*taijiquan qi shi* 太極拳起式). The second and third forms are 'single whip' (*dan bian* 單鞭) and 'raise hands, step-up' (*ti shou shang shi* 提手上式). Added to these is, 'embracing a jug' (*bao gang* 缸抱). This kind of work is common in traditional *taijiquan* and, in fact, all for the thirty-seven essential forms can be used in this way.

Yang Shaohou instructed him to pause and hold single forms for several minutes while practicing the long solo sequence, both to master the forms, and build a strong foundation. Doing the set in this way could take one to two hours.

4. The Thirty-seven Essential Forms

The Thirty-seven Essential Forms are listed in the order they first appear in the Yang traditional long form.

1) Ward	<i>peng</i>	棚
2) Roll	<i>lǔ</i>	擻
3) Squeeze	<i>ji</i>	擠
4) Press	<i>an</i>	按
5) Single Whip	<i>dan bian</i>	單鞭
6) Raise Hands, Step-up	<i>ti shou shang shi</i>	提手上式
7) White Crane Spreads its Wings	<i>bai he liang chi</i>	白鶴亮翅
8) Brush Knee, Twist-step	<i>lou xi ao bu</i>	攙膝拗步
9) Hand Plays the <i>Pipa</i>	<i>shou hui pipa</i>	手揮琵琶
10) Step-up, Deflect Downward, Parry & Punch	<i>jin bu ban lan chui</i>	進步搬攔捶
11) Apparent Closure (& Counter with Push)	<i>ru feng si bi</i>	如封似閉
12) Cross Hands	<i>shizi shou</i>	十子手
13) Fist Under Elbow	<i>zhou di chui</i>	肘底捶
14) Step Back, Repulse like Monkey	<i>dao nian hou</i>	倒攢猴
15) Diagonal Flying	<i>xie fei shi</i>	斜飛式
16) Needle at Sea Bottom	<i>hai di zhen</i>	海底針
17) Fan Through the Back	<i>shan tong bei</i>	扇通背
18) Turn & Chop Opponent with Fist	<i>zhuan shen pie shen chui</i>	轉身撇身捶
19) Cloud Hands	<i>yun shou</i>	雲手
20) High Pat on Horse	<i>gao tan ma</i>	高探馬
21) Parting Kick	<i>fen jiao</i>	分腳
22) Kick with Sole	<i>deng jiao</i>	登腳
23) Step-up, Punch Down	<i>jin bu zai chui</i>	進步栽捶
24) Rising Kick	<i>ti jiao</i>	踢腳
25) Hit Tiger	<i>da hu</i>	打虎
26) Double Winds Pierce Ears	<i>shuang feng guan er</i>	雙風貫耳
27) Part the Wild Horse's Mane	<i>ye ma fen zong</i>	野馬分鬃
28) Fair Maiden Weaves at Shuttles	<i>yu nü chuan suo</i>	女穿梭
29) Snake Creeps Down	<i>she shen xia shi</i>	蛇身下勢
30) Golden Rooster Stands on One Leg	<i>jin ji du li</i>	金雞獨立
31) White Snake Puts-out Tongue	<i>bai she tu xin</i>	白蛇吐信
32) Palm Thrust	<i>shi zi zhang</i>	十子掌
33) Step-up, Punch to Groin	<i>jin bu zhi dang chui</i>	進步指裆捶
34) Step-up, Form Seven Stars	<i>shang bu qi xing</i>	上步七星
35) Retreat to Ride the Tiger	<i>tui bu kua hu</i>	退步跨虎
36) Turn body, Sweep the Lotus	<i>zhuan shen bai lian tui</i>	轉身擺蓮腿
37) Bend Bow, Shoot Tiger	<i>wan gong she hu</i>	彎弓射虎

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5. Families

It is somewhat difficult to describe what distinguishes *peng* as ‘an essential form’ from *peng* ‘as one of the thirteen powers’. When discussing *peng* as a ‘form’ (*shi* 式) features such of shape and structure come-to-fore. As a ‘power’ *shi* (勢), *peng* is better understood as a transformative process in relationship with other types of ‘martial kinetic energy’ (*jin* 勁). Of course, structure must be understood clearly if the practitioner is to hope realistically for energetic mastery.

Grouping kindred forms into families is a feature of the [Masich Internal Arts Method](#) approach to [Thirty-seven Essential Forms](#) training. It follows a tendency found in most schools to relate forms to one another by comparison and contrast but goes a step further by systematically presenting these relationships. This method of training clarifies the similarities and differences in forms and provides a method for translating solo single form training into partner application. By learning ward-off in the context of the other *peng*-like energies—press, diagonal flying, cloud hands, and part the wild horse’s mane—it is possible, even at an early stage of learning, to shift one’s understanding from ‘form’ to ‘transform.’ Thirteen groupings of like-forms, called ‘families’ provide the foundation for this highly traditional yet highly progressive approach.

