

An Introduction to Chan-ssu Chin

by Christopher Dow
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In Tai Chi, the dynamic principles taught by the tai chi symbol (see “Symbolic Movement: The Taijtu and Tai Chi Chuan” at phosphenepublishing.com) are illustrated during the most basic form of Chan-ssu Chin, the Tai Chi “Reeling Silk Exercises.” Originally, Chan-ssu Chin was an element of Chen style, but it can be applied to any style. It is called Reeling Silk Exercises because of its resemblance to the sensation of harvesting silk threads from the cocoon of the silk worm. One grasps the end of the thread and gently pulls the thread out farther and farther. The pulling must be steady and even: Too light a pull, and the silk will not unreel from the cocoon, and a pull that is too strong or uneven will break the thread. The idea is that one should feel a light but steady sensation of drawing, swirling, and pushing something—an internal force or energy—throughout a pattern of motion.

This description highlights what is one of Tai Chi’s most important characteristics. Most people identify Tai Chi by its slow speed, but a more important attribute is its continuity of movement, which helps lead both force and energy smoothly throughout the body. Moving slowly has specific benefits, such as improving strength, balance, and timing, giving opportunity for observational awareness of the body, and to make subtle corrections, among other things. But although Tai Chi is most commonly practiced at a fairly slow pace, it can be practiced at faster speeds, too, which reveals information that is invisible at slower speeds. And Tai Chi’s slowness of practice hasn’t remained consistent over time. Observe, for example, old film footage of Tai Chi experts. Even the Yang stylists often move at a pretty good clip compared to their modern-day counterparts, but their movements are always smooth, flowing, and connected. And, of course, if you were to actually use Tai Chi for self-defense, you might move quite rapidly, but you would still need continuity of movement to execute the applications properly.

In Tai Chi, it is the continuity of the flow of the movements and energy that really counts. In a sense, Tai Chi is work—you should have a sensation of lightly but constantly pulling and pushing something through the various motions. It is a very light sensation, akin to feeling the swirl of water on your limbs when you wave them loosely around while standing shoulder-deep in a swimming pool.

In addition to training continuity, Chan-ssu Chin exercises create a greater awareness in one’s body of the yang and yin forces and help teach one to apply them in directly practical ways. They also help teach one to use the

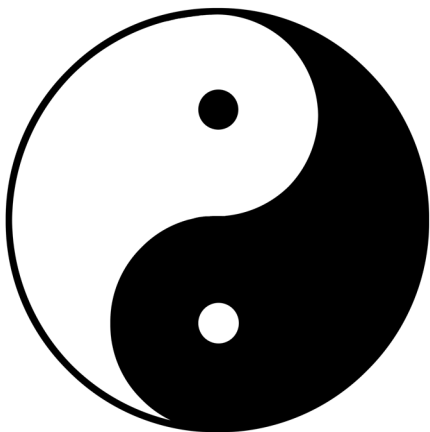
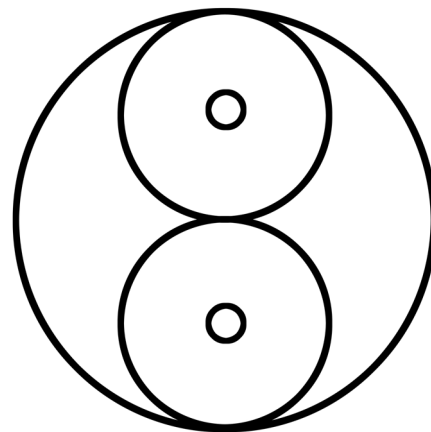


Figure 1: The tai chi symbol depicts the major forces of opposition and cooperation that underlie the functioning of reality. Left, it is depicted in its normal form, right, in its doubled form.*



entire body to move the hands and arms instead of moving the limbs independently of the body. There are many formalized styles and patterns of Chan-ssu Chin that utilize the various Cardinal and Ordinal Energies, and you also can do free-form Chan-ssu Chin based on your own Tai Chi movements, or groups of movements. The purpose here is not to present a catalog of Chan-ssu Chin forms but to illustrate the points made above through its most basic form.

In this most basic form, you stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart and use one hand or the other to trace the outlines of a large tai chi symbol in the air in front of your torso—or on a poster tacked to a wall. (Free poster at phosphenepublishing.com.) This tai chi symbol, also called the “taijitu,” would have a diameter of the distance from your tantien to your chin. Using a poster is helpful for beginners, but it quickly becomes quite easy to visualize a tai chi symbol of the appropriate size in front of you. One major limitation to following an actual tai chi symbol on a poster is that the tai chi symbol depicts rotation in only one direction, whereas Chan-ssu Chin constantly switches the direction of rotation. A helpful alternate symbol to remedy this is the double tai chi symbol, without the yin/yang color distinction. (Figure 1) (Free poster at phosphenepublishing.com.) This allows for easy visualization of rotation in two directions. The other major limitation, however, argues against using a poster at all once the basic pattern is established in the mind. This is because following a poster emphasizes the arm movement rather than the waist movement, which as we will see below, is the more important of the two.

The basic pattern of movement can be seen in Figure 2, and the pattern as traced by the hand is illustrated in Figure 3. First you circle one or the other hand in front of you in one direction for the desired number of circles, then you tighten the circle to arc around the head of the yang fish shape and toward the center. From there, the reverse arc around the head of the opposite fish takes your hand back to the circumference, though now going in the opposite direction than before. After one or more revolutions around the periphery, the hand can follow another recurve through the center, causing it to move in the original direction. Note that no matter which direction your hand is going around the circle, the circling inward along the recurved line always occurs around the head of the yang fish because that is where the energy of the circling is strongest. The circling around the head of the yang fish can start at the top of the circle or at the bottom, depending on when you want to change direction, and both changes should be practiced with each arm.

The tai chi symbol traced by the hand is flat in front of you, like a poster, but this is really only a secondary plane. Tai Chi is motivated by the legs and directed by the waist, so actually, the arm movement is merely a reflection of the rotation of a taijitu on its primary plane, which is horizontal, bisecting your torso at waist height. It is created when the hips and waist use Roll Back alternating continuously from side to side to describe the tai chi symbol around the central axis of the spine. Note the waist-level tai chi symbol in Figure 3. This is the symbol that you

actually should use to motivate the movement of the entire body, which is then transmitted to and refined in the movement of the loose arm tracing the symbol in front of you. Figure 4 shows how the sensation of balance, accompanied by the energy transference inherent in the movement, cycles at waist level through the horizontal taijitu as you rotate side to side.

If you hold your arm loosely out in front of you and allow it an elastic connection with your torso and then describe the figure-eight of the horizontal tai chi symbol with your hips and waist, motivated by alternate pumping of the legs, your arm will automatically follow the circling of the hip and waist movements but on the vertical plane. Simply rotating the hips in one direction or the other in a figure-eight pattern motivated by repeated firmer pushes from one leg or the other will cause the hand on the opposite side from the dominant leg to describe the vertical tai chi symbol's outer perimeter. The slightly stronger push from the dominant leg is what propels the arm over the top of the vertical circle. The direction of the vertical symbol's rotation will be either clockwise or counterclockwise, depending on which leg is doing the extra pushing and which direction you are rotating your middle. If you are using your right arm, pushing predominantly with the left leg will rotate your arm clockwise, while pushing predominantly with the right leg will rotate it counterclockwise. The mirror image is true for the left arm.

To change direction, you simply sink slightly onto the nonpushing leg when your weight goes onto it then begin pushing more strongly with it instead, at first in a slightly upward curve that then flattens out as it returns to its former plane. This will propel the energy of the push in the opposite direction through the horizontal recurve and will cause the hips and waist to start circling in the opposite direction without stopping their momentum. It also will cause your extended, elastically connected arm and hand to simultaneously follow through the recurve in the vertical taijitu you are creating in the air in front of you and return to the outer

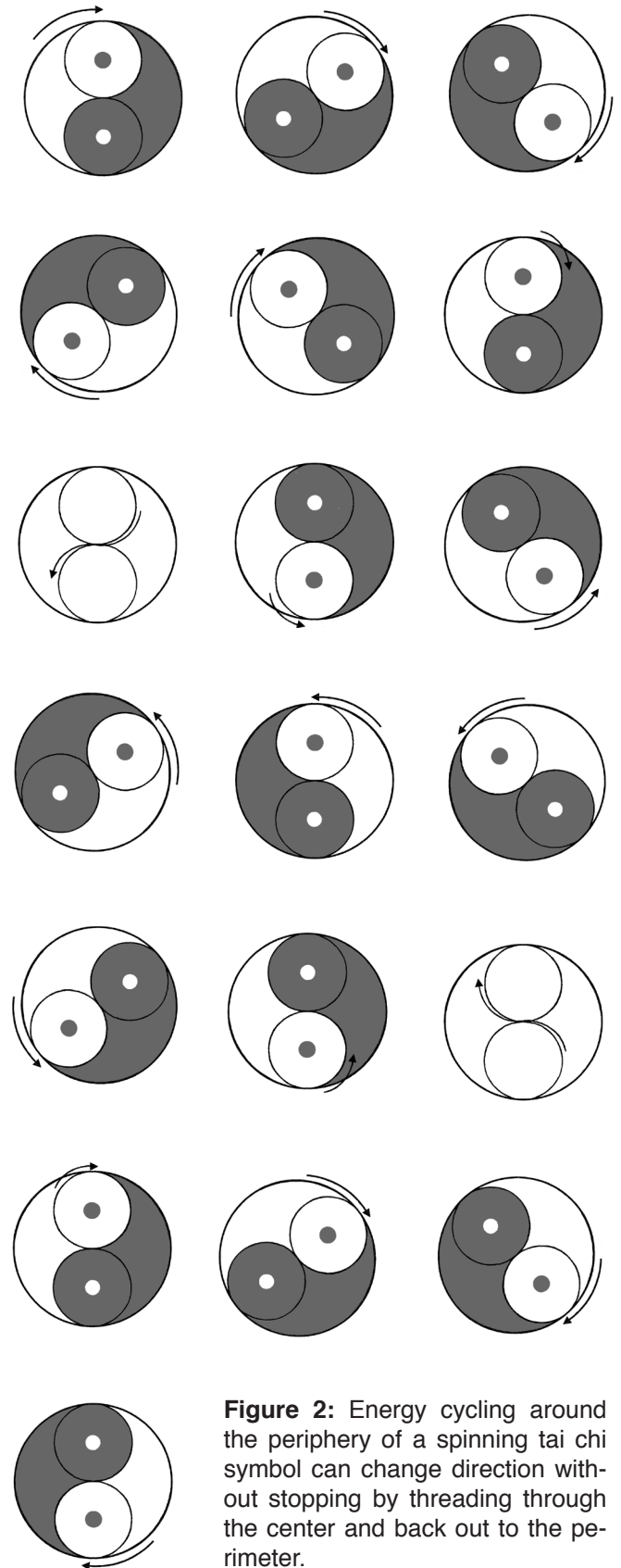


Figure 2: Energy cycling around the periphery of a spinning tai chi symbol can change direction without stopping by threading through the center and back out to the perimeter.

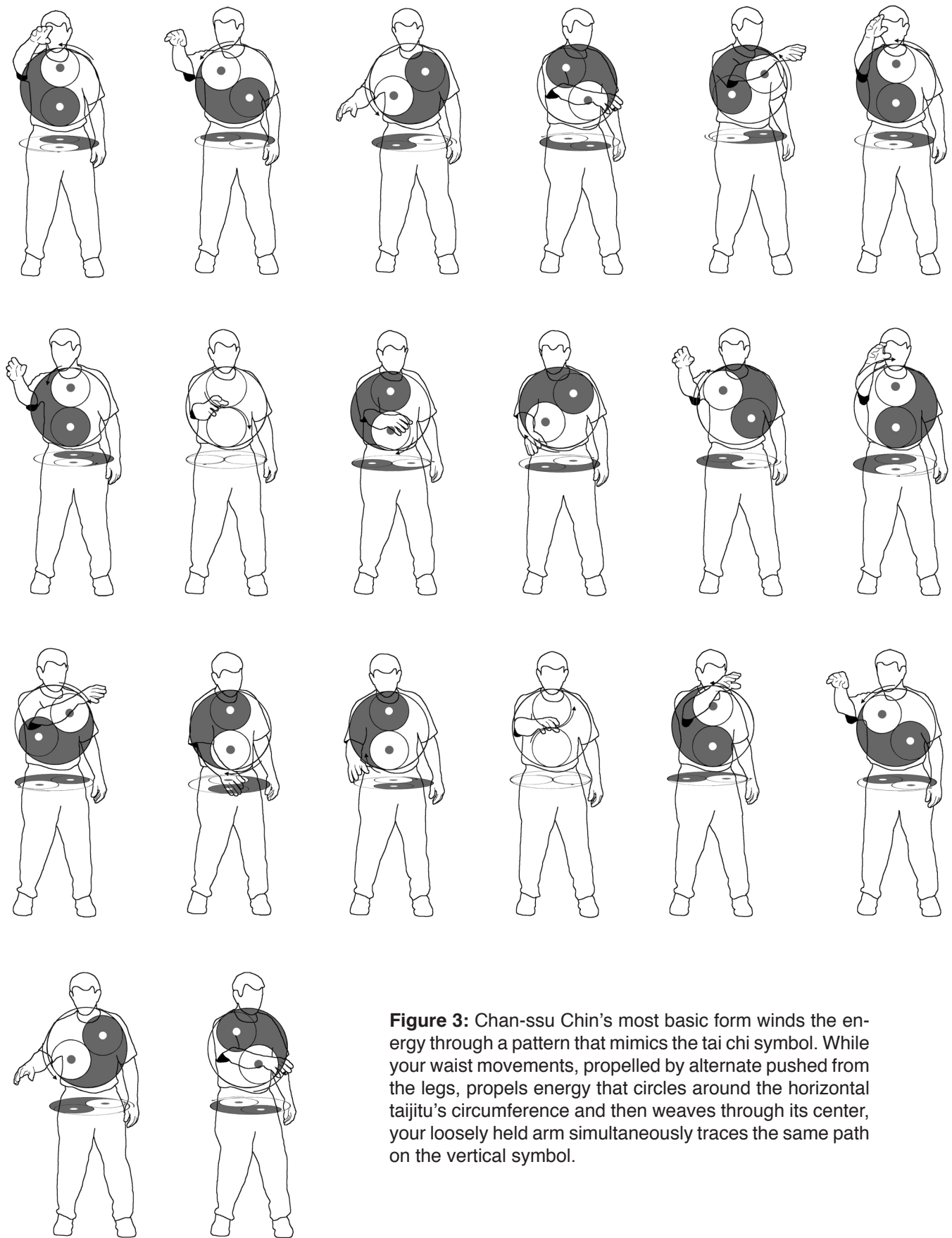


Figure 3: Chan-ssu Chin's most basic form winds the energy through a pattern that mimics the tai chi symbol. While your waist movements, propelled by alternate pushed from the legs, propels energy that circles around the horizontal taijitu's circumference and then weaves through its center, your loosely held arm simultaneously traces the same path on the vertical symbol.

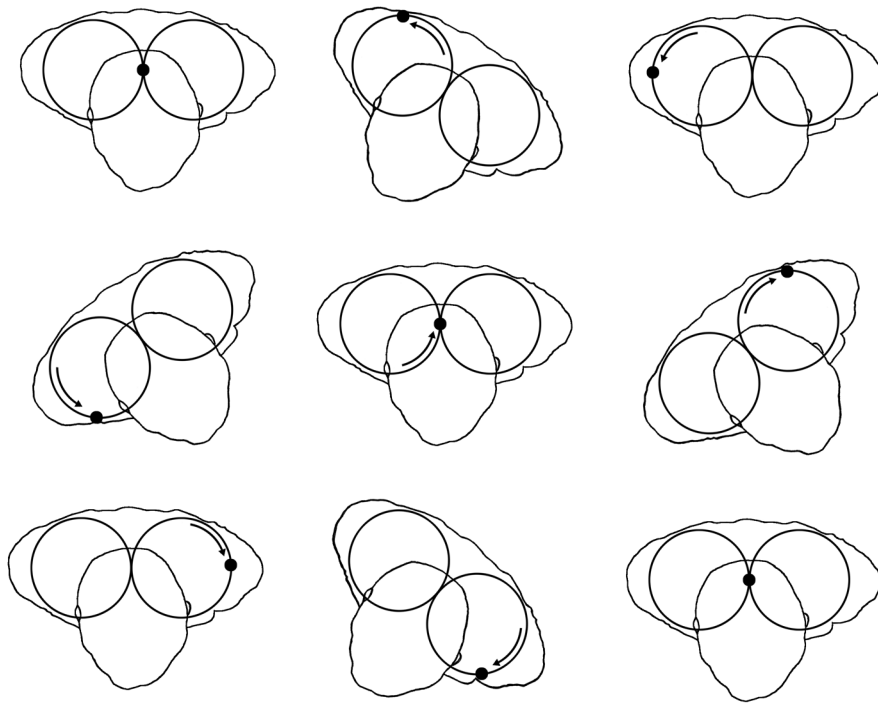


Figure 4: During Chan-ssu Chin, the primary plane of rotation is through the waist as you trace a figure-eight pattern, using your weight as a stylus. The arrow indicates the direction of movement, and the dot represents your sensation of weight and energy as you shift back and forth.

circle, also now going in the opposite direction. Swinging through the horizontal recurve again in the same fashion but in the opposite direction again reverses the direction of rotation of both horizontal and vertical symbols. Again, the change of direction is always initiated around the head of the yang fish, and either at the top of the circle or at the bottom.

Note that the recurve of the tai chi symbol that is in front of you is oriented vertically at the moment of change, while the one that circles your hips is oriented side-to-side. An interesting facet of the taijitu formed by your hips and waist is that if you take a bird's-eye view, the roots of the feet—the Bubbling Wells—are where the eyes of the two fish are located.

The energy is pushed up the

legs from there and converted into spinal rotations by the rotations and weavings of the waist-level taijitu. The smaller you can smoothly and accurately draw the symbol with your waist, the more refined and sensitive your arm movements will become and the more potentially powerful your Tai Chi will be.

This Chan-ssu Chin exercise does something similar to the energy exercise where you roll the Tai Chi ball between your palms in that they both rotate a tai chi sphere, though the two spheres are created differently. More important, you could say that this basic form contains the distilled essence of Tai Chi, it just doesn't develop the permutations. Tai Chi's specialty is developing the permutations through training one to draw the physical force and energetic power through the Cardinal Energy spheres/ovals, along various planes, and with various twists and turns, using various stepping patterns, and in various combinations. However, as a training device, this basic Chan-ssu Chin can be especially valuable in teaching one to connect the feet with the hands through whole-body movement. Once you develop the correct feeling, it's easy to move on to more complex forms of Chan-ssu Chin or to play it free-form if you choose. And even if you don't, your Tai Chi will be much improved by your learning a whole-body connection that helps lead to rooting and to transmitting energy from that root to any part of the body at will.

Excerpted from

Circling the Square: Observations on the Dynamics of Tai Chi Chuan

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* For free downloads of posters of the taijitu, visit phosphenepublishing.com.