

# Tàijí Quán Sǎn Shǒu (太極拳散手) The Famed Tàijí Fighting Set By J. Justin Meehan

## Origins

The Tàijí 2-Person Form is also referred to as the Tàijí Sparring Form, the Tàijí Duet, the Tàijí 88 Matching Form and the Tàijí Sǎnshǒu (散手) Free Hand form. In this article, I will refer to it as the Sǎnshǒu form. Although it is clear that all the movements are from Yáng family Tàijí Quán, it is not clear whether the Sǎnshǒu form was part of the Yáng curriculum or was created by a Yáng Tàijí Quán practitioner, Chén Yánlín, or one of his teachers.

Chén Yánlín (陳炎林 1906 - ?) became well known in the West when Shànghǎi's Willow Pattern Press in 1947 published the first English-language text on Tàijí Quán, *Tàijí Quán: Its Effects and Practical Applications*, under Chén's pen name of Yearning K. Chen. We don't know much about Chén Yánlín, and much that we know is contradictory. Jou Tsung Hwa met Chén and had a photograph with him in 1980. According to Jou, Chén was a Traditional Chinese Medicine physician who lived and taught Tàijí in Shànghǎi and had been practicing Tàijíquan since he was four years old. (1) It is also known that Chén Yánlín studied under Tián Zhàolín (田兆林 1891–1960), and there are photographs of them together, but it is disputed whether he studied under Yáng Chéngfǔ ((楊澄甫 1883–1936). (2)

Tián Zhàolín studied under second-generation Yáng family member Yáng Shǎohóu (楊少侯 1862–1930) who taught a middle-frame version of Yáng Tàijí Quán. Yáng Chéngfǔ was the third generation Yáng family master, who is known

for having developed the large-frame style (bigger movements, longer stances), which is the style most widely practiced today. Although disputed, Chén Yánlín is listed as a student of Yáng Chéngfǔ on the Yáng Family website. (3)

### The Tàijí Bible

The earliest presentation of the Sànsǒu form was published in 1943 by Chén Yánlín in his book, *Tàijí Hand Form, Broadsword, Straight Sword, Spear and Sparring*, which included ink drawings as well as a written description of the entire 88-movement Sànsǒu form. His book also included ink drawings and descriptions of the Yáng Tàijí solo form, as well as the Yáng Style Broadsword, Straight Sword, Staff and Spear forms. The book was one of the most widely circulated and well respected Tàijí texts in China, and at one time was referred to as the "Tàijí Bible."

There is an interesting yet questionable story of how the book came to be. According to legend, Chén Yánlín was a student of Yáng Chéngfǔ and Yáng Chéngfǔ had a secret manuscript that included illustrations and explanations of Yáng family solo and weapons forms, the 2-person Sànsǒu form, and Qìgōng (氣功) practice. Chén Yánlín asked to borrow the manuscript overnight and Yáng agreed, not knowing that Chén had a group of scribes who would spend the entire evening transcribing every word and illustration before returning the original source material to Yáng Chéngfǔ the next day.

### Truth versus Legend

This version was later refuted by Chén himself. According to Stuart Olson, who was T.T. Liang's student, "Chén's book infuriated the Yáng family, who then released a smaller book, claiming that Chén's publication was a forgery and that their new smaller book was the genuine material," and that "Chen, in typical Chinese style, claimed the book contained his own theories and that he had only used the Yáng family name for authenticity." (4)

What seems more likely is that Chén copied photographs of Yáng Chéngfǔ used in an earlier (1931) book, *The Art of Tàijí Quán*, which included the solo form, applications and Push Hands, under Yáng Chéngfǔ's name and later reworked by Zhèng Mǎnqīng (鄭曼青) and republished in 1934. All the illustrations (except for Qìgōng) show a rotund Chinese man who looks like Yáng Chéngfǔ. Further, the Tàijí presented clearly demonstrates the large-frame style of Yáng Chéngfǔ. Another refutation of

the legend comes from Tián Yíngjiā (田盈佳), son of Tián Zhàolín. In an interview, Tián Yíngjiā states:

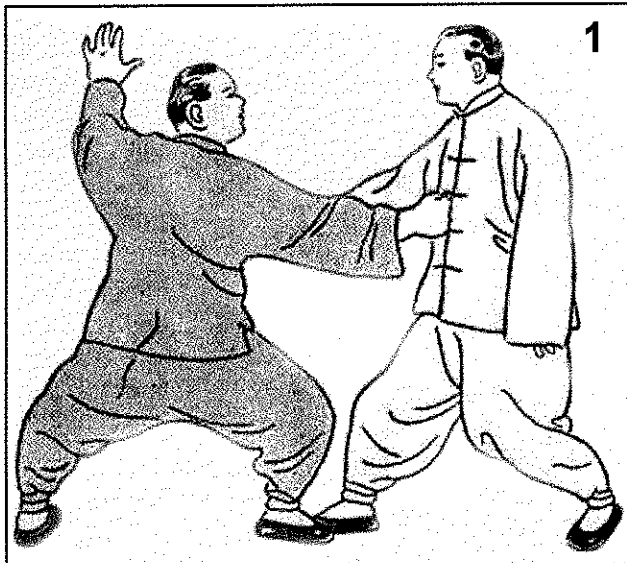
"The book entitled *Tàijí Boxing, Saber, Sword, Spear, and Push-Hands* was co-authored by Chén Yánlín and his fellow student Táng Shí Huán (唐石桓) while both were students of Teacher Tián Zhàolín. Some mistakenly believe that Chén Yánlín manipulated and stole the material from Yáng Chéngfǔ, later publishing it under his own authorship. Chén Yánlín is unlikely to even have known Yáng Chéngfǔ. His Tàijí and explanations came from Tián Zhàolín.

"The book was initiated during dinners when Chén Yánlín invited Teacher Tián Zhàolín to his home. A secretary on hand recorded the conversations and Teacher Tián's explanations. In the original draft, there were photos of Táng Shí Huán pushing hands with Chén Yánlín. Chén asked Teacher Tián for photos of Tián demonstrating the frame, however, Tián could not recall where his photos had been placed. Tián then asked that stick drawings be made of him in the set. When the book was published, however, the only photos included were those of Chén Yánlín. This upset both Teacher Tián and his students. Later the book was republished by yet others. Many consider the work rare and even a necessity for beginning Tàijí learners; actually, the book dealt only with the large-frame practice. The large frame is but a small part of the whole of Yáng's Tàijíquán. It did, however, do much to promote Tàijí." (5)

The two sections on Qìgōng and the 2-person Sànsǒu form are unique features because nowhere else are there indications that the Yáng family or their respected senior students practiced publicly or privately the Qìgōng sequence or the 2-Person Sànsǒu form. Yáng Zhènduó (楊振鐸), fourth son of Yáng Chéngfǔ, has denied that Qìgōng was in any way included as part of the Yáng family curriculum. It seems that if there was a secret text or secret Qìgōng practices, they would have come to light by now. The depicted exercise seems closer to more external and well-known Yìjīnjīng (易筋經) Muscle Changing Exercises or the Bādùànqì (八段錦氣功) Qìgōng (Eight Pieces of Brocade) exercises most often attributed to Shàolín origin.

Perhaps the most authoritative explanation regarding the Sànsǒu form comes from Yáng Jūn (楊軍), sixth generation Yáng family standard-bearer and grandson of Yáng Zhènduó. He stated on the Yáng family website that "Originally Yáng family members engaged in paired practice on individual moves only; they did not have a

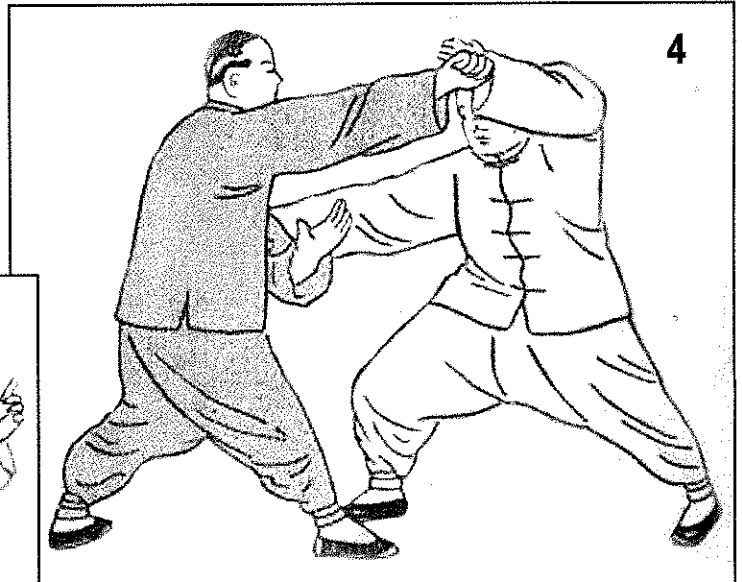
continuous two-man form per se. A student of Yáng Chéngfū named Chén Yánlín created a two-man form by connecting up some of the single move elements that Yáng Chéngfū showed.” (2)



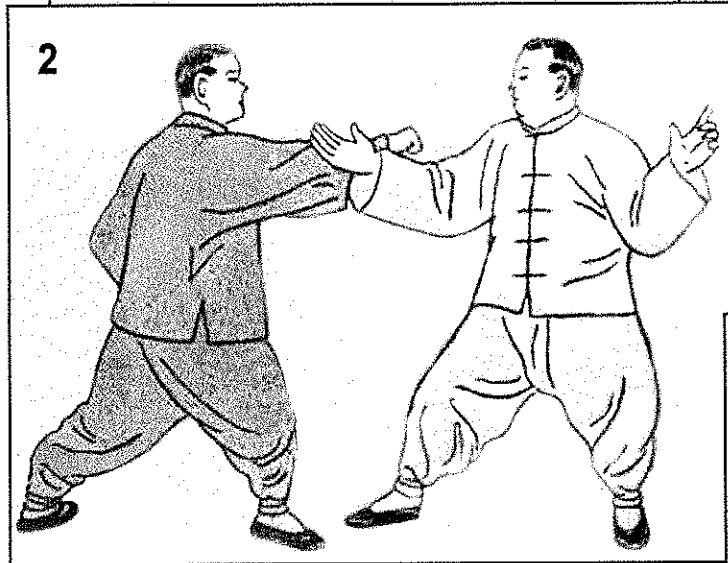
1

The first five movements (from Chén Yánlín's book).

1. Step Forward and Punch
2. Raise the Hand (Ward Off)
3. Stepping Forward Block and Punch
4. Parry and Punch
5. Step Forward with Left Shoulder Strike



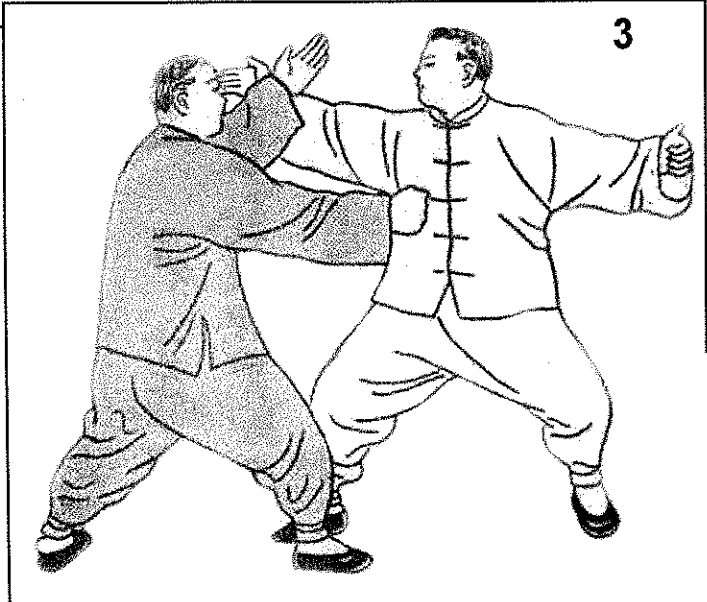
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2



5

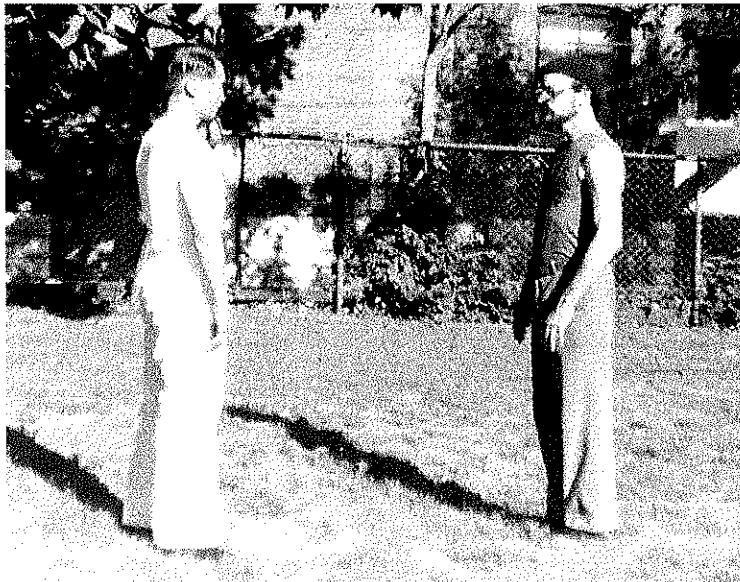


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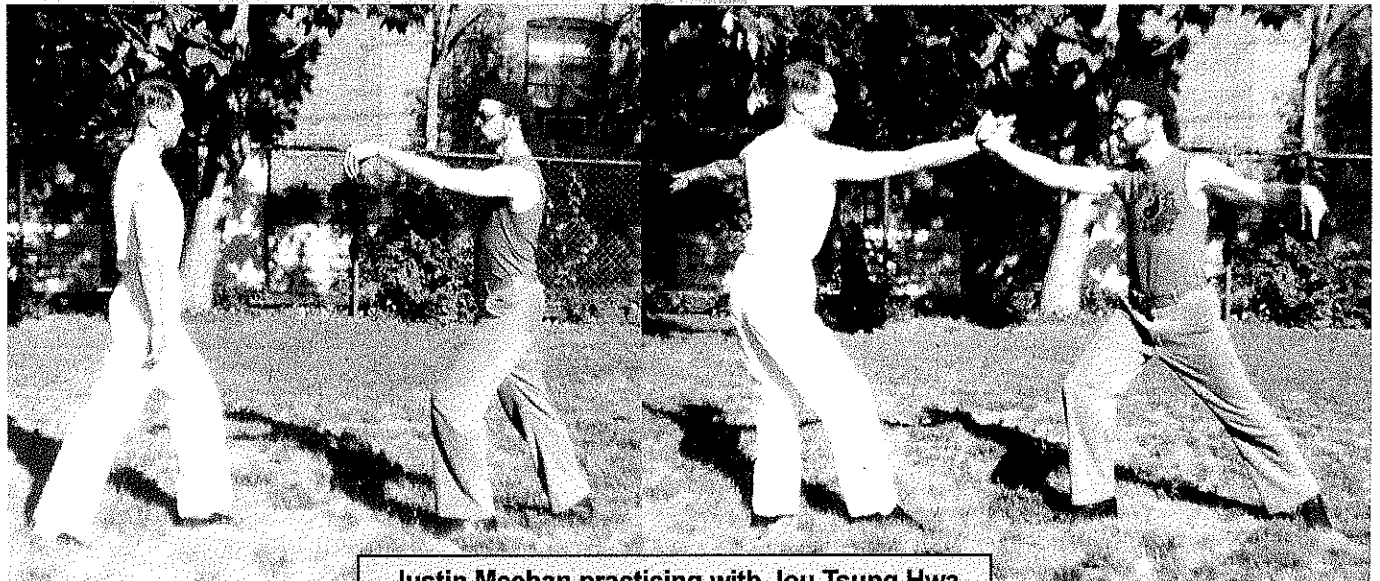
### Sànshǒu in the United States

The 2-person form was popularized in the United States by T.T. (Tung Tsai) Liang (1900–2002) who took up Tàijǐ for health reasons at age 47 and lived to the age of 102. He was a senior disciple of Zhèng Mǎnqīng and accompanied him to help translate and assist at

the United Nations in New York during the mid-1960s. Liang and Zhèng Mǎnqīng eventually parted ways and Liang moved on to teach throughout the US, especially in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New Jersey.



T.T. Liang studied Chinese Gōngfū (功夫), Wǔshù (武術), and Yáng Tàiji from many respected Taiwanese masters and is reported to have studied the 2-person form from Yáng Héxióng (楊何雄 1886-1984) in Taiwan (purportedly a student of Yáng Shāohòu, the older brother of Yáng Chéngfū). Liang took the basic 88-movement 2-person routine that he learned from Hsiung and added other routines. In his book, *The Tàiji Two-Person Dance*, Jonathan Russell states that Liang added routines taught to him by Wáng Yánnián (王延年 1914-2008) and Zhèng Mǎnqīng to bring the 88-movement 2-person form to 175 postures. Liang taught this routine to his students, who continued to teach this 2-person set in the US, especially Ray Haywood, Jonathan Russell, Stuart Alve Olson and Harvey Kurland.



Justin Meehan practicing with Jou Tsung Hwa

Another great master was Jou Tseng Hwa (1917-1998), author of *The Dao of Tàijiquan*. Jou was one of the leaders of Tàiji in the United States and was able to bring many of the greatest masters to teach and share understandings at his annual Zhāng Sānfēng (張三丰) festival held at his Tàiji Farm in Warwick, New York. Jou had training in the 2-person form of T.T. Liang but preferred the 88-movement Sànsǒu form depicted in Chén Yánlín's book. He met Chén in Shànghǎi in 1980. Jou often demonstrated the 2-person form with his senior students, Marsha Rosa and Susanna T. DeRosa. According to Jou's disciple, Jay Dunbar, Jou stated that "Learning solo forms without learning Sànsǒu is like buying shoes and taking home only the box." (6) Dunbar and Kathleen Cusick continue to offer Sànsǒu workshops at their Magic Tortoise Tàijiquan School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Sam Masich teaches the 88-movement form internationally and has created 5-section simplified 2-person forms for both Sànsǒu and Straight Sword.

### Sànsǒu Practice

The Sànsǒu 2-person form is the bridge between Tuī Shǒu (推手) Push Hands skills practice and actual fighting. Based on Yáng Tàijiquan, the 2-person form allows the practice and application of every movement in the Yáng Tàiji

long form. It has 88 movements to be practiced with a partner, with 44 interrelated movements on each side (Side A and Side B). Many people study a Tàijí form with little understanding of how each movement has a martial application. Practicing applications improves practice of the form. Thus, form and function are closely related and a clear understanding of applications can help the practitioner correct his or her forms practice.

When practicing with partners, one person (Side A) starts by attacking his or her partner (Side B), then Side B intercepts the technique, redirects the attack and uses another technique to counterattack. This goes back and forth until Side A completes the 44 movements of attack and defense and Side B does the same. Then they exchange positions with B becoming A and A becoming B until the other 44 movements are completed.

With each attack there is a response, which most often is to draw back, neutralize and then step forward to counterattack. The applications of each movement are both practical and informative. The movements should flow, for the most part, similar to Tūi Shǒu as well as Dàlǚ (大履) Big Rollback routines. The organization of these 88 movements into a single form is evidence of the work of someone not just familiar with individual applications but also capable of creating a balanced choreography that allows a seamless inclusion of all 88 applications.

The 2-person routine can be practiced gently so that students can learn more about self-defense applications of Tàijí form postures without risking harm to themselves or their partners. Each attacking posture is met with neutralization so there should be no room for a buildup of antagonistic force.

In this regard it is necessary to have some background, experience and skill in Tūi Shǒu and Dàlǚ practice before studying the Sànsǒu form. This is not like some external partner forms (such as Seven Star Praying Mantis, Hung Gar Tiger and Crane, or Choi Li Fut Plum Flower forms), where speed and strength are more important than blending without the use of force. In truth, attack

postures are much less important than the ability to stick, adhere, join, follow, blend, neutralize and counterattack. The Tàijí Sànsǒu form is not a test of speed or strength, but instead is a complex and harmonious exercise of Yīn (陰) and Yáng (陽) martial interplay.

After gaining some proficiency in this Sànsǒu form it becomes easier to see that every attack can be neutralized and countered. When actually sparring, knowledge of Sànsǒu increases the repertoire of movements that can be utilized. According to Chén Yánlín, as translated by Paul Brennan, "after you have reached a high level in practicing pushing hands and large rollback, then the practical functions in the sparring set should definitely be studied. . . . "The (Sànsǒu) sparring in Tàijí Boxing is completely different from other styles of martial arts: it is a matter of being sticky and connected, of letting go of your plans and just responding to the opponent, of both neutralizing and issuing being carried out with subtlety rather than obviousness, and of moving continuously without interruption. Just like in pushing hands and large rollback, whatever the technique or posture, there is always neutralizing and issuing. They are to happen naturally, always directed from the hips, and without stiffness creating exerted action in the movements." (7)

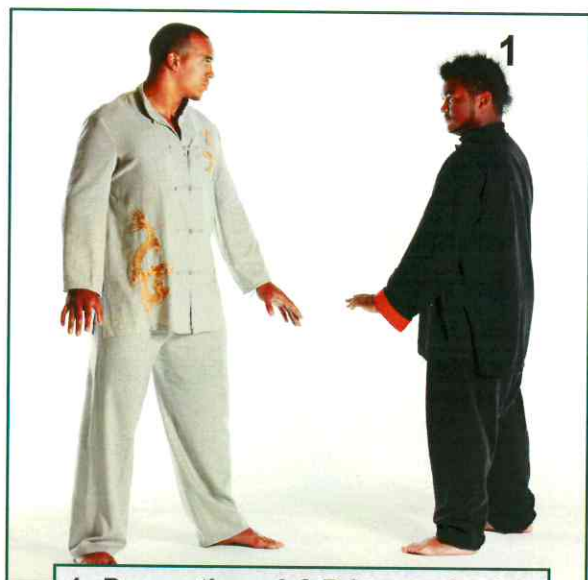


Having said this, it is still imperative to have correct instruction and hands-on feedback, which is only possible with a skilled and experienced teacher. It is often more difficult to make corrections and undo bad habits than it is to learn the applications correctly in the first place. It involves more of an exchange of high-level energies than a competition of techniques.

#### Notes

- (1) *The Dao of Tàijíquán: Way to Rejuvenation*, by Tsung Hwa Jou. Tuttle Publishing, 1989, pp. iv, 215.
- (2) *Tián Zhàolín: A Legacy of Yang Tàijí*, by Leroy Clark and Key Sun: [www.art-of-energetics.com/New/tian\\_zhaolin.htm](http://www.art-of-energetics.com/New/tian_zhaolin.htm)
- (3) [www.yangfamilytaichi.com](http://www.yangfamilytaichi.com)
- (4) *Cultivating the Ch'i: The Secrets of Energy and Vitality*, by Stuart Olson. Dragon Door Publications, 1993, p. 15.
- (5) *Yang's Taiji Boxing Secrets*: [www.dimatawn.net/Taiji/TianZhaolin.com](http://www.dimatawn.net/Taiji/TianZhaolin.com)
- (6) [www.magictortoise.com/Sanshou](http://www.magictortoise.com/Sanshou)
- (7) [www.brennantranslation.wordpress.com](http://www.brennantranslation.wordpress.com)

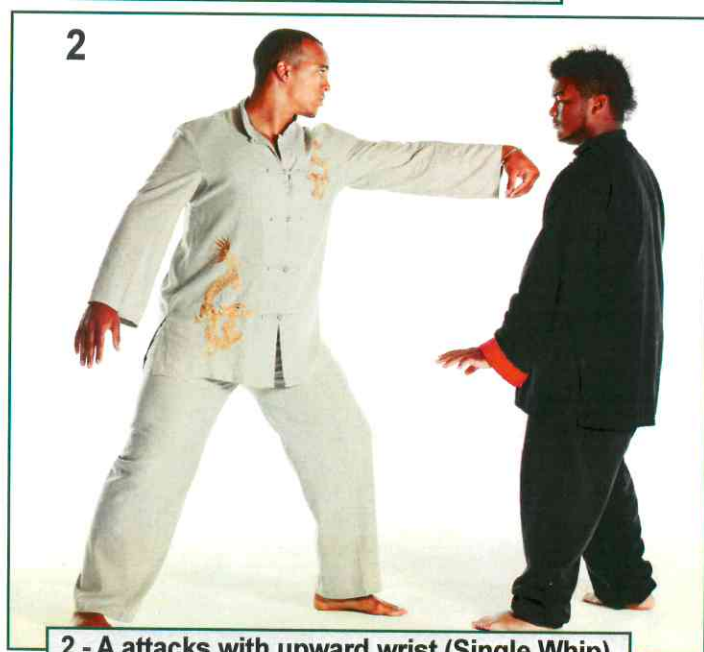
2-Person Set: First 15 Movements (A- in White - B in Black)



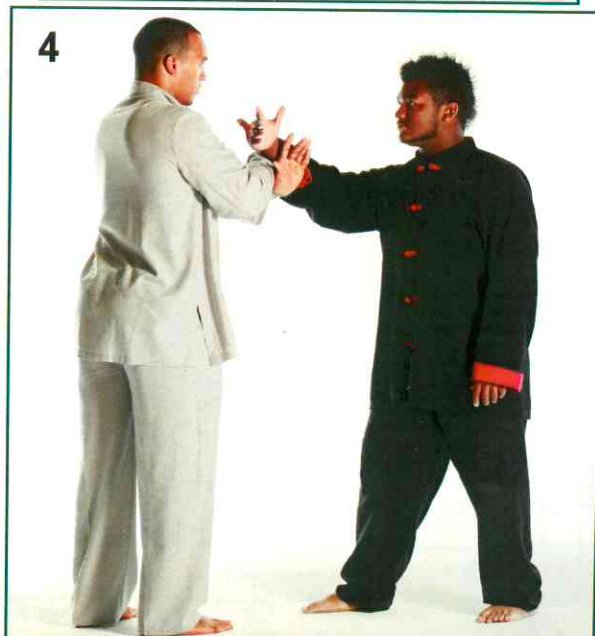
1 - Preparation - A & B face each other



3A - B steps back and redirects (Ward Off)



2 - A attacks with upward wrist (Single Whip)  
B steps back to avoid strike



4 - A advances and removes arm (Apparent Closing)



3 - A attacks with right punch (Step Forward)



Apparent Closing - Close up



**4A - B withdraws lead foot and steps back A attacks with right punch (Punch)**



**6**



**5**



**6A**

**6 - A neutralizes by deflecting B's arm and counterattacks with shoulder strike (Kao)**



**5A**

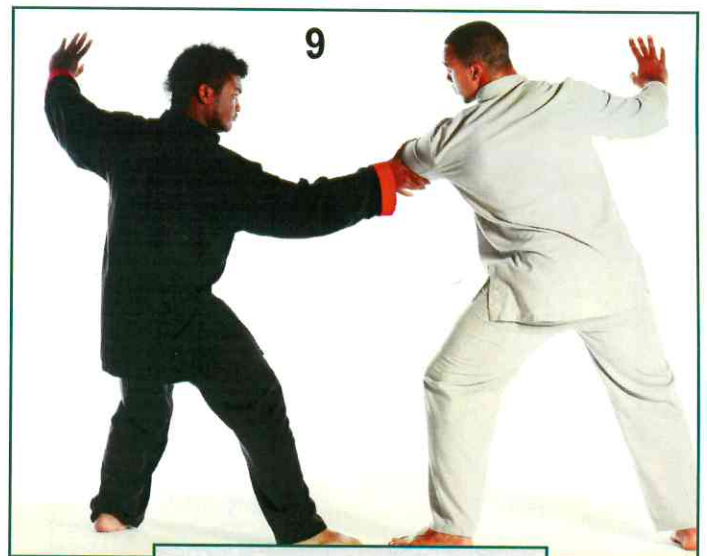


**7**

**5 - B neutralizes punch & attacks with right punch (Punch)**



**7 - B presses down elbow and strikes to back of A's neck (Shoot the Tiger)**



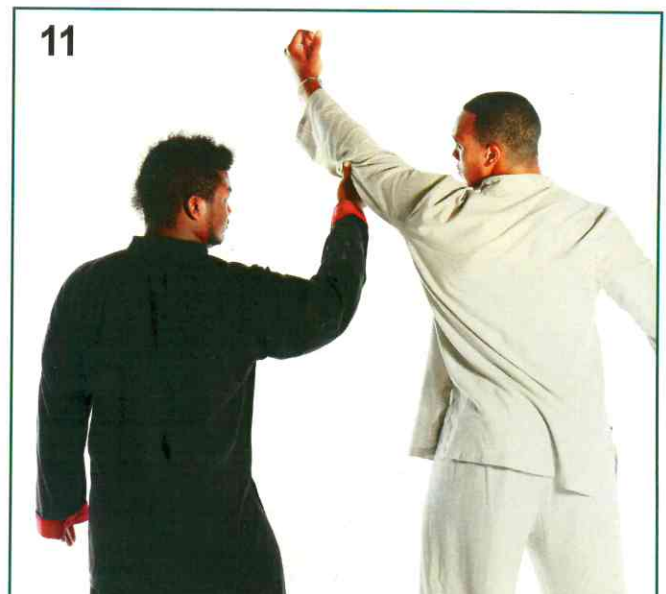
**9 - B deflects elbow sideways**



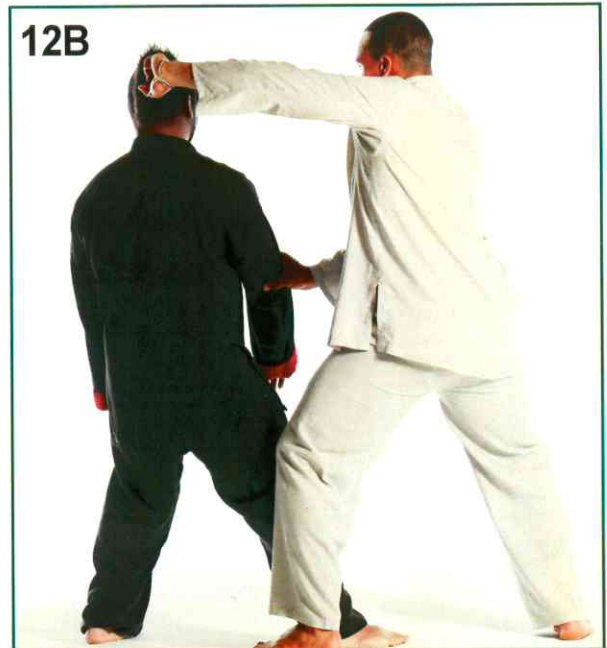
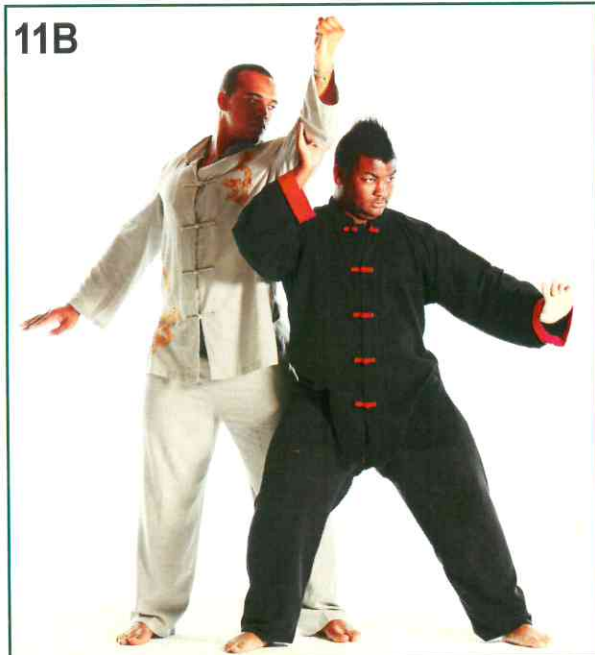
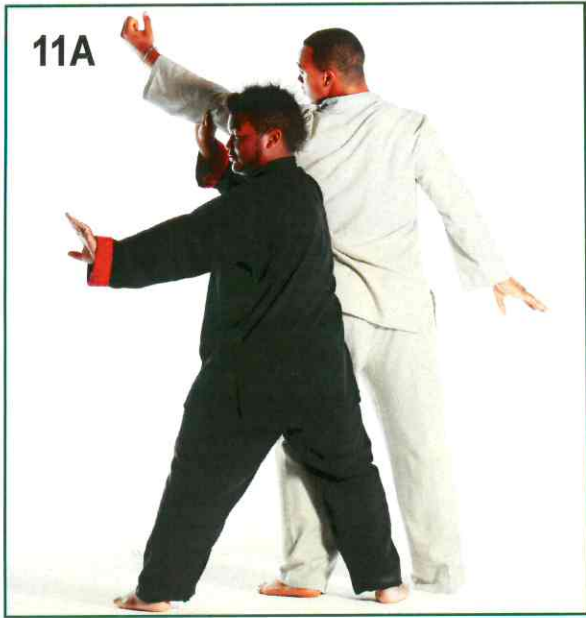
**10 - A strikes with overhand backfist (Chop with Backfist)**



**8 - A neutralizes strike and pivots 180 degrees. A catches B's arm and attacks with elbow (Elbow)**







11 - B neutralizes upward and attacks with shoulder (Kao)

12 - A presses down elbow and steps behind B to inverted knuckle strike to back of B's neck (Shoot the Tiger)



Kao - Close up

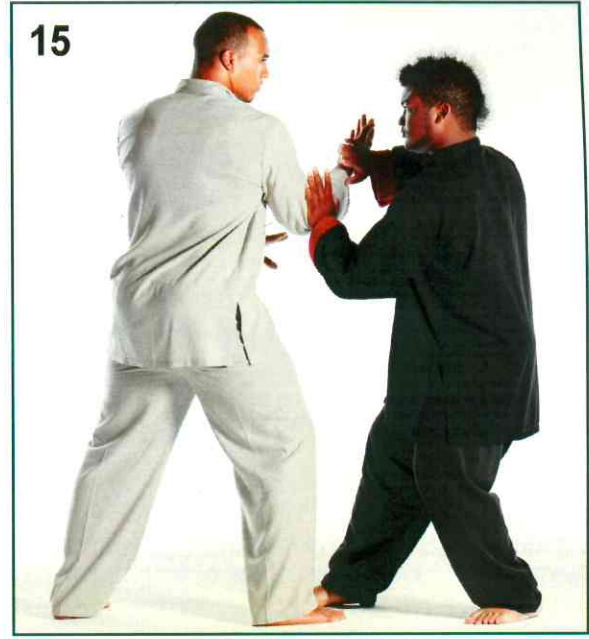


Shoot the Tiger - Close up

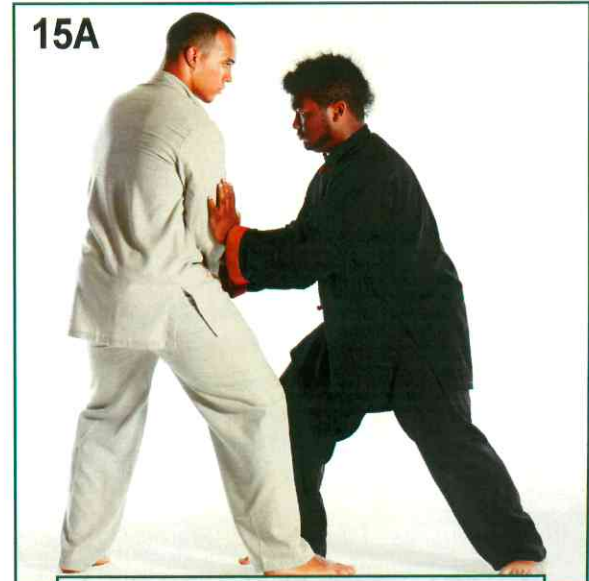


13

13 - B presses A back to neutralize strike and pivots 180 degrees, separates A's arm and strikes with right backfist (Chop with Backfist)

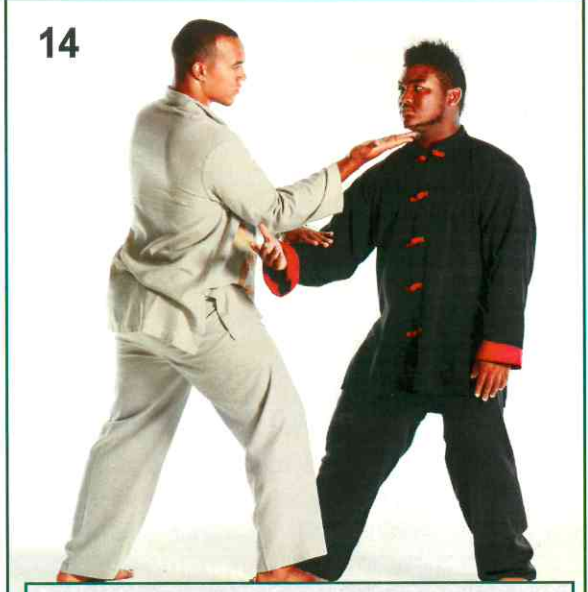


15



15A

15 - B withdraws and neutralizes and attacks with double push (Push)



14

14 - A neutralizes backfist and attacks with spear finger to throat (White Snake)



White Snake - Close up



Push - Close up



## Resources

See [www.brennantranslation.wordpress.com](http://www.brennantranslation.wordpress.com) for a complete English translation of Chen Yanlin's Tàijǐ Two-Person Set, with illustrations and names of movements, translated by Paul Brennan.

*The Tai Chi Two-Person Dance: Tai Chi with a Partner* (Paperback), by Jonathan Russell and T. T. Liang. North Atlantic Books, 2003.

*Steal My Art: The Life and Times of T'ai Chi Master, T.T. Liang* (Paperback), by Stuart Olson. North Atlantic Books, 2002. Stuart Olson also translated the 6-volumes series of Chen Yanlin. See [www.valleyspiritarts.com](http://www.valleyspiritarts.com) for information on a forthcoming work on the Tàijǐ 2-person Sànsǒu set.

*The Dao of Tàijíquán: Way to Rejuvenation* (paperback), by Tsung Hwa Jou. Tuttle Publishing, 1989.

*The Essence and Applications of Tàijíquán* (paperback), by Yang Chengfu, translated by Louis Swaim. North Atlantic Books, 2005.

*Tai Chi Chuan: Its Effects and Practical Applications* (paperback), by Yearning K. Chen. Newcastle Publishing, 1979.

*Tai Chi Touchstones: Yang Family Secret Transmissions* (paperback), by Douglas Wile. Sweet Chi Press, 2010.

YouTube postings include the following.

T.T. Liang Sànsǒu – Two Person, posted by Gordon Muir  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5awEnqSwQ6k>

Tàijǐ 2 person set (Tàijǐ opposing person form), posted by Alex May  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REVCMRUImGo&list=PL0EC7BB6020DFDD86>

Xinyi Hunyuan Tàijíquán Conference, Beijing 2011, part 9, posted by Roy Hanney. Justin Meehan and Jardena (Zhardana Tiger) Green demonstrate 2-person forms.



**J. Justin Meehan (center), is assisted in demonstrating the Partner Set by his son Jason Meehan (left) and Nicholas Alsup.**