

Chan Szu Chin Exercise of Master Feng Ziqiang

by
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Master Feng's system of Chan Szu Chin exercises is derived from the Chen family style of Taiji, taught to him by Master Chen Fake in Beijing, China, and from his Xin Yi Iio He Quan background with Master Hu Yao Zhen. Master Feng puts great emphasis on the practice of both Qigong and Chan Szu Chin exercises to improve Form, Function, Health, and Push Hands skills. Because of the necessary terseness of the Chinese language, I thought it might be interesting to examine a few of these exercises in greater depth. I apologize in advance to my teacher, Master Zhang Xue Xin, for any errors or mistakes which are the result of my misunderstandings alone.

Chan Szu Chin exercises are an excellent means of practicing Taiji principles of movement. For many of us, practicing the form alone is not the easiest way to improve our skills. In the form, we are often just finishing one movement, when we have to go on to a new and completely different movement in the form. Although there are repetitions, they are spaced away from each other and not practiced repetitively. This is where the Chan Szu Chin exercises come in. They allow us to practice basic body mechanics, which will form the basis for one or more movements contained in the form. They allow us to focus more carefully on the important principles of movement required in the Chen style.

Although Chan Szu Chin exercises are found exclusively in the Chen style, other styles often accomplish the same result by repeating individual movements. By way of example, both Yang Zhenduo and the late Fu Zhongwen advocated the repetition of individual basic movements from the Yang form as a way to improve performance and to develop internal power. In addition to Chan Szu Chin exercises, the Chen form has its own supplementary power training exercise, such as twisting the short stick (for Chin Na), shaking the long staff, and rolling the Heavy Jar (for developing waist power and body connection). Master Feng's style includes training supplements as well.

1. Side-to-Side neck turn
2. Rolling the head around the neck
3. Circling the shoulders (individually)
4. Double shoulder circles
5. Forward and backward double shoulder press
6. single arm circle (left and right)
7. Single under arm spiral and press
8. Double alternating under arm spiral and press

9. Double arm counter circles (Tying the Coat)
10. Finger thrust and chop with waist turn.
11. Two arms circle in, up, and out and then press down at the sides
12. Two arms circle in, down, and out and then lift up at the sides
13. Circle arms out and double finger thrust forward on each side
14. Circle arms in and chest thrust out
15. Double arm spirals under arms and thrusting out to sides (and reverse)
16. Left upward and outward "Golden Cock" arm spiral
17. Right upward and outward "Golden Cock" arm spiral
18. Double elbow circles (forward and backward)
19. Single elbow circles (left and right)
20. Single wrist circling (outward and inward)
21. Double wrist circling (outward and inward)
22. Left and right spiral punching (in left then right bow stance)
23. Circling the hip (a) sideways (hula hoop), (b) upward, and (c) downward
24. Twisting the waist with double arm swing from side to side
25. Circling the upper torso around the waist
26. Circling each knee
27. Circling both knees
28. Circle and kick with each leg
29. Turn the foot and leg in and out (left and right)
30. Shaking the body

What I would like to do in this article is to go into a more complete description of three of Master Feng's Chan Szu Chin exercises. This will give the practitioner a greater appreciation of the technical requirements of these exercises. Hopefully, the reader will even be able to practice these exercises on his or her own. They are certainly helpful regardless of style. Keep in mind that these are not just "range of motion" or "loosening up" type exercises. They will increase range of motion but in Taiji, no part of the body should move in isolation. "When one part moves, the whole body moves" is a good maxim to keep in mind. Beginners should emphasize integrated whole-body movement "led by the waist." More advanced Chen-style practitioners should remember to keep "peng" alignment throughout and to circle each and every moveable body part in a coordinated fashion to increase "spiral" body power. I have chosen three of the easier exercises to focus on: Single Shoulder Circling (#3), double shoulder circles (#4), and Waist Turning (#24).

Exercise #3 Single Shoulder Circling

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to increase the range of motion in the shoulder and to open and close the "thoracic hinge," which divides the chest and back along the center line (see August 1994 *Tai Chi Magazine* regarding the "Thoracic Hinge"). This will also aid in the ability to neutralize by rolling the shoulder and to develop the power of "kou" or shoulder smash.

1. Forward Shoulder Circle:

Stance: Stand with left foot forward about the natural distance of one step. The front foot faces forward with the rear foot turned out at a 90-degree angle. This stance is like a shortened front stance. As the shoulder rolls and circles, the weight will shift forward onto the front leg and then backward onto the rear leg. The knees are kept bent and the weight of the body is kept lowered. Do not let the body stand up out of its rooted position on either leg. Compress and expand the Kua to sink and rise (see 1994 *Tai Chi Magazine* regarding "Pumping the Kua").

Body Movement: For the Single Shoulder Circle, there are two main variations: (1) circling upward and backward or (2) circling forward and downward. The lead shoulder is doing the circling and the rear shoulder remains back in a relatively stabilized position. The lead shoulder will be making a complete circle. After completing at least 9 repetitions with the left foot forward, change the stance and do at least 9 repetitions with the right foot forward. The important distinction between this exercise, as opposed to a simple flexibility or "range of (shoulder) motion" exercise, is that in Chan Szu Chin exercises the whole body is involved, not just the shoulder. The shoulder turning should be the result of shifting forward and backward in stance; raising and lowering the body; circling the "tantien/mingmen ball"; and opening and closing the chest and back at what could be called the "thoracic hinge." This is not just an isolated shoulder movement. Try to involve the whole body to create the maximum shoulder circle.

2. Backward Shoulder Circle: This is the reverse of the forward shoulder circle. In this exercise, push backward from the front left leg to the rear right leg, raising slightly. The forward left shoulder will rise with the lifting body. The left shoulder and left side of the chest will open outward, opening the chest at the sternum. The body will continue to circle the shoulder backward and downward as the weight shifts and sinks downward on the right rear leg. The body will then bring the shoulder from underneath to forward as the body shifts from the rear leg to the forward left leg. Now the chest is closed or hollowed and the back is open or rounded. Do at least 9 repetitions on each side with the left foot forward first and then reverse the stance. Some important points to remember are to keep the rear shoulder backward. There is another Chan Szu Chin sub-exercise, which alternates shoulders, both rolling simultaneously, but this is not the exercise which I am describing. In this exercise, it is primarily the forward shoulder circling and not the rear shoulder or both shoulders circling together. By keeping the rear shoulder backward while circling the forward shoulder, we make it easier for the chest and back to open and close. This also helps to increase the range of motion of the lead shoulder. Another important point is to avoid the tendency to bend the torso forward and backward at the waist. Try to keep the torso vertical and upright throughout.

Just as the leg has a "Kua" (crease between upper thigh and front torso called the inguinal groove or crease) so also does the shoulder have a "Kua" (also called the "Shoulder Nest" by Denver based Chen-style instructor Liang Bai Ping) in the front of the body where the shoulder crease can open and close adjacent to the pectoral muscle. Try to maximize the opening and closing of the shoulder "Kua" and the "Thoracic Hinge." Another benefit of this exercise is that it can massage and invigorate the heart and lung region and expand oxygen capacity.

Applications: As with all Taiji movements, there are numerous applications within the circularity of any movement. A description of any one application should not be considered exhaustive but merely illustrative. However, doing the movement without any understanding of application can also be limiting.

For the Backward Shoulder Roll, imagine or have someone push against the front of your shoulder. Instead of resisting the push to the lead shoulder, neutralize the push by rolling the shoulder upward and backwards and opening the chest, in order to neutralize the punch.

For the Forward Shoulder Roll circling up from behind and down the front, you can think of practicing "Kou" or a downward smash to the body of a close range opponent.

Other Exercises: After doing the left shoulder, change position and do the same exercise with the right shoulder. After doing the backward shoulder circle, try turning the shoulder in the opposite circle, creating the forward and downward single shoulder circle. Just reverse the instructions already described. One can also try the following exercise:

Exercise #4-Double Shoulder Rolls

Begin this exercise by standing in a forward-facing, Chen-style "horse" stance and circling both shoulders backwards. After that, circle both shoulders forward and inward simultaneously. The key is to raise and lower the stance while opening and closing the chest and back. Do not stand

up all the way so as to straighten the legs or to lose the power potential of the hip joints or kua. Once again, do at least 9 repetitions forward and at least 9 repetitions backward.

Application: The Double Backward Shoulder Rolls could be used to disengage a two-handed forward push to both of your shoulders, and it forms the basis of an important two-person "Push Hands" exercise. This popular two-person exercise is shared by many different styles and masters, including my first (in 1967) Taiji instructor, Master William C.C. Chen.

Form: The ability to open and close the shoulder "kua" and to circle the shoulder is an important sub-movement to many movements in the original Chen form, Master Feng Zhiqiang's simplified **24-movement Form, and his 48-modified Chen form**. The Forward Shoulder circle can be seen as a closing movement preceding the White Crane Spreads Wings posture and can be used to strike the opponent's ribs with your shoulders after deflecting his punch. The Backward Shoulder Circle is seen as the Double Arm Opening just before Movement #8 "Lifting Hands and Raising Leg" and before Movement #29 "Shake Both Feet."

Exercise #24-"Horizontal Waist Turn"

(Side-to-Side Waist Turn)

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise will be to develop the horizontal turning power of the waist. In order to do that, we assume an open Chen-style, horse-riding stance. Master Feng allows the feet in this stance to turn out naturally about 30-40 degrees each. **They are not limited to the both feet pointing forward and parallel to each other**. Sink into your stance and turn the waist and arms from side to side. Keep the hips back and do not allow them to turn too much. By isolating the waist from the hips, we can concentrate on the horizontal ("ping"-level) elasticity of the waist and back. We also massage and invigorate the kidneys and other organs within the "belt" meridian. Keep the torso within the open stance power base. Do not shift the weight completely from one side to another. Keep dynamic tension within the inner groin arch of the Bow Stance.

As a word of caution, do not overdo this exercise, especially if you have lower back and spine problems. Typically, it is done 9, 18, or 36 times in a row, each count involved turning to both sides. Be careful not to raise and lower your height. Sit down and stay down! Do not throw your arms and upper torso so vigorously as to possibly wrench your back or spine. Use smooth and relaxed Taiji-type motion. Each turn involves opening one kua and closing the other kua on the side to which we are turning.

Stance: Keep a low, but not uncomfortable, "horse" or "open Bow" Stance. The legs and hips should not turn very much. The purpose of this exercise is to emphasize waist turning. This exercise could be done as if sitting on a low stool. Master Zhang Xue Xin would place his knee under my tailbone in order to keep my stance seated and down throughout this exercise, not rising. Sit into your Kua, and do not hyper-extend forward at the knees. Both knees should keep their outward bow or "peng," just like an arched bridge. This is a very good leg and stance-strengthening exercise. When one "Kua" opens, the other closes but does not protrude outward.

When turning to the right, the right Kua closes and the left Kua stretches (but does not protrude) open. Keep the knees turned out in the direction of the feet to avoid strain.

Body Movement: Both arms will cross the body from side to side and help the waist to turn. When the waist turns to the right, the right hand is in a back fist position and lower than the body-crossing left hand, which is in "hammer" fist position. An application of the hand could be to block low and out with the right back fist and chop down and across with the left hammer fist or inside forearm to the neck or shoulder of the opponent.

The major goal of this exercise is to (1) create horizontal "spring or elastic" power in the waist and back along what is referred to as the "Belt Meridian"; (2) to make the waist flexible like pliable rubber; and (3) to develop torquing power (like wringing out a wet towel). Turn the horizontal waist muscles in one direction, wind up even more to the same direction, release, and then let the waist spring turn the torso and arms to the other side.

Rationale: The waist, which includes the "tan-tien" and "ming-men," has several important spring- or rubber band-type actions, including:

1. Side to side, (along the "ping" plane)
2. Up and Down (along the "li" plane)
3. Lateral circling (along the "shu" plane)
4. Combinations of one, two, and three, such as diagonal or circular movements.

This exercise emphasizes and strengthens the side-to-side waist-turning movements. If the side-to-side waist power is correctly manifested, then many other movements relying on this commonly used body action, contained in the Chen form, will also be improved. Not only will the body develop greater internal power, but the organs within the abdominal cavity (liver, spleen, stomach, kidneys and intestines) will benefit from this gentle waist massage. Loosening the waist also increases our ability to neutralize by turning of the waist in push hands practice. Keep your central body axis aligned vertically. Keep the "baihui," top of head, straight and gentle, lifting upward throughout. Do not shift your hip outside the power base created by the inner arch of your legs.

Form and Applications: The use of this exercise can be found in the Chen 48 Form of Master Feng: **in movement #46, "Sink Waist With Elbow Down," and also in movements #6 called "Move and Hinder with Elbow on Both Sides" in the 2nd Chen style routine, Pao Twi.** The application could be to step in front of your opponent's lead right leg with your lead right leg, so that you are facing legs at the level of shin or thigh. Block his forward hand attack with your rear left hand. Bring your lead right arm under his attacking right arm. Use your right elbow to hit his back and/or kidney area by turning your waist to the right. Besides being the recipient of an elbow strike, the opponent may be thrown over your right lead leg to the ground.

Final Word

As you may now see, there is a lot going on inside these Chan Szu Chin exercises. To do them all slowly, for a minimum of 9 times for each exercise, could take anywhere from 60 minutes to over an hour. This does not mean that one cannot practice individual movements separately. Each exercise has something special to offer. I have limited myself to a hopefully clear technical description of how to do a few of these easier, basic exercises. I hope you will be able to enjoy their benefits and increase your progress. Although much more could be said regarding the Taiji Principles, let me just summarize by saying this: Be sure to emphasize and to distinguish the substantial and insubstantial; circle and spiral; and the whole body integrated movement. Also, be sure to emphasize and to distinguish between opening and closing; uniting inside and outside; expanding and compressing; raising and lowering; turning left and right; advancing and retreating; maintaining "peng" alignment throughout; and, of course, staying smooth and relaxed. Good Luck!

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