Abstract

Though well known in China, Sun Family Taiji is one of the least known of Chinese martial arts here in the West. Created by one of China's top martial artists, Sun Lutang, in what many consider the "Golden Years" of Chinese pugilism (turn of the 20th century), this style offers proper structure, full body power, and dynamic stepping. Training in Sun Taiji presents not only an extremely healthy exercise for all ages, but also an effective system of combat. This is a concise yet inclusive overview of Sun Family Taiji Boxing, including the historical background, real-world applications, and the theory involved in this often overlooked system of Taiji.
Introduction

Sun family Taiji boxing is the most recently developed system of traditional Taiji practiced today. Created by the legendary boxer Sun Lutang (1861-1933) during the golden years of Chinese pugilism, this martial art represents the culmination of over fifty years of martial experience compressed into one art form. According to his daughter, Sun Jianyun (1913-2003), of all his accomplishments Master Sun considered his Taiji to be his “crowning achievement” within his lifetime—considering all of his accolades this is quite a statement to make. The following pages present the influential historical setting in which Sun Lutang developed his unique style and detail the fundamental principles upon which it was based.

Historical Setting

Sun Lutang was born in 1861 near Baoding in Hebei Province. His birth name was Sun Fuquan, and later in his life he took the name Han Zhai. Lutang was a name given to him by his Bagua teacher Cheng Tinghua (1848-1900) in Sun’s early 20’s. Sun Lutang was a sick, weak child. Being born into a family of poverty it was common to see Sun on the streets begging for money. Eventually Sun discovered the arts of Bajiquan and Shaolinquans, quickly progressing in these arts due to rigid practice sessions and hard work. As time progressed Sun dedicated himself to the arts of Xingyiquan and Baguazhang with the most combat-oriented teachers available. Guo Yunshen (1822-1898) and Li Kuiyuan taught him Xingyi, while Cheng Tinghua tutored Sun in Bagua. It did not take Sun long to master these arts, and eventually his reputation as a fighter spread throughout Asia. Even though Sun Lutang was small in size, he accepted any and all challenges, earning victories over Shuai Chiao (Chinese wrestling) players, as well as Judo players from Japan.

It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into all the details of Sun’s extensive martial history. Suffice it to say that throughout the years Sun Lutang trained hundreds of fighters in Xingyi and Bagua, and also worked as a bodyguard where he acquired invaluable real world, hand-to-hand combat experience. Via these encounters, Sun refined his boxing and grappling skills, being meticulous in his note-taking and study of combat theory and application. He honed his own techniques accordingly with scrupulous detail to ensure he did not alter the principles of the traditional arts, yet made sure that the techniques he taught (as well as practiced) were efficient, accurate, and applicable. For a more detailed account of Sun Lutang’s life history please refer to Tim Cartmell’s translation of Sun’s A Study of Taijiquan (2003, North Atlantic Books).
While visiting Beijing in the summer of 1914, the famous Taiji teacher Hao Weizhen (1842-1920) fell ill. Sun invited Hao to stay with him so that he could help the teacher recover his health. Many people believe that Sun actually healed Hao, but Sun actually just took care of him—bringing the doctor to the house to treat him, running to fill herbal prescriptions, helping to feed Hao, etc.

When Hao recuperated, he taught Sun the Wu Yuxiang (1812-1880) Taijiquan system as a token of gratitude. Already an accomplished master in his own right, Sun must have seen great benefit in learning this system—he immersed himself in practice day and night. After several years of intensive study, Sun decided to create his own system of Taiji. He removed techniques he felt were useless and repetitive, and included many characteristics of Bagua and Xingyi that he had mastered over decades of practice. Sun Jianyun explained, “Sun Taiji has Baguazhang’s stepping method, Xingyiquan’s leg and waist methods, and Taijiquan’s body softness” (Cartmel, personal communication).

“Sun’s Taijiquan emphasizes the importance of skill, sensitivity, and technique over the development of exceptional strength or speed.” ~ Tim Cartmel, personal communication.

Foundational Training

Sun Taiji follows the same sequence of movements in its form as the other Taiji systems, and shares the major principles, such as Taiji’s Thirteen Postures. Yet Sun Taiji is distinctive in that the practice of the form duplicates exactly how the techniques are applied in combat. Other styles of Taiji tend to divide their study into form practice, then separate drills to develop applied martial theory and applications, whereas Sun Taiji combines all these aspects into one comprehensive martial system. Hence there is only one traditional form that is under eight minutes long when practiced in full. Though push hands (tui shou) is practiced within the Sun Taiji system, more emphasis is put on the actual application of force and technique with uncooperative partners, such as sparring and/or grappling drills. One must remember that push hands was originally much more combative in nature than what is commonly seen in today’s martial society. Various levels would be taught from basic attempts to disrupt an opponent’s balance, to all out wrestling incorporating joint immobilizations and strikes. Today some of these aspects are absent from Taiji groups in an attempt to make push hands ‘safer.’ Unfortunately many of these teachers are missing the core ideas being taught in push hands type training.

All too often students become overwhelmed and confused with extensive curriculums. This is where Sun’s genius comes into play: he developed the form to replicate fighting as much as one can for solo form practice. One example can be found within the footwork.

Sun Taiji employs the follow-up step from Xingyi (the same footwork can be found in fencing, western boxing, and folk wrestling), which immediately trains whole body power. The upright stance (fighting posture), coupled with the rhythm of one foot advancing followed by the rear foot, and back again is unique to the Sun Taiji system, as other systems of thought emphasize low postures to build strength and flexibility. The use of whole body power is integral to any combat-oriented system, for if a practitioner weighs 180 pounds it is far more advantageous to use the full 180 pounds of mass, coupled with the velocity of the technique, than just to use the strength of an isolated appendage. This unification of body and technique is the epitome of force equals mass times acceleration (F=MA), and is a vital trademark of Sun Taiji.
As stated earlier, Sun incorporated the circular footwork of Bagua into his system of Taiji. This afforded the practitioner circular mobility in technique, coupled with the linear footwork borrowed from Xingyi. Bagua’s stepping theory stresses constant changing, always trying to get to the opponent’s back or side (the safest place to be in a fight where one’s opponent cannot strike them), staying tight to the body and disrupting the opponent’s center of balance. Once the opponent’s center has been compromised, a throw, strike, joint manipulation, or kick can be applied. The Bagua influence is most evident in the Taiji technique of Repulse Monkey, which is akin to the single palm change.

Though these aspects of Xingyi and Bagua were incorporated into Sun Taiji, Sun Lutang maintained the Taiji framework and principles as taught to him by Hao Weizhen. Redirection of force, sticking, and manipulating weak angles are all characteristics of Taijiquan. Beyond the solo form and sparring/grappling practice, the curriculum also covered the Taiji’s Thirteen Postures. These are not solo movements per se, but rather principles found throughout the form used to apply force in combat regardless of whether one is striking, or grappling (kicks and knees are included in striking, as joint manipulation is included into grappling in this instance). Broken down into the eight energies of force, the first four being the most prevalent, and then the five stepping methods, I offer a brief explanation for each as follows:

### Four Directions (si zheng)

1. Ward Off (peng) – this represents any kind of rising energy generated by the body. Supported from below or to lift upward much like the hull of a boat supports the weight of the cargo when in water.
2. Rollback (lu) – redirecting energy in a wedge-like manner, bringing force around the body, and maintaining central equilibrium (zhong ding) by turning around the center of the body.
3. Press (ji) – applied straight into the opponent’s body with a squeezing type force that is sudden, not maintained. One analogy Tim Cartmell uses is like throwing a pebble onto the head of a drum.
4. Push or Press Downward (an) – force applied in a downward trajectory generated by the whole body, not just the arms.

### Four Corners (si au)

1. Pluck (cai) – Much like when one tries to pick an apple from the tree: if one simply pulls on it, the stem does not break free. But once the slack is taken out of the pliable branch, all one needs to do is give it a quick jerk and the stem snaps off.
2. Split (lie) – Where the upper body goes one direction and the lower body is led in the opposite direction. One visualization is the mechanics of a dead bolt lock where the one set of gears moves in one direction, while the other set is moved in the opposite direction.
3. Elbow (zhou) – This concept is conveyed by using the elbow in any way possible from a strike, to coupling it with a throw or takedown. No one specific technique is localized; this is a general theory of applying the elbow.
4. Lean (kao) – can be applied with any part of the body other than the arms or legs. Essentially to lean on, or into an opponent with one’s own body. Think of it as a body stroke.
Five Stepping Methods (wu ba fa)

1. Forward Advance (qian jin) - simply means to step forward.
2. Backward Retreat (hou tu) - means just what the name implies, to step backwards.
3. Look Left (zuo gu) - simply means to move to the left.
4. Gaze Right (you pan) - to shift to the right.
5. Central Equilibrium (zhong ding) - where one has one's weight/balance (equilibrium) centered evenly, where one is most stable.

Another unique facet of Sun Taiji is the kai-he movement found at the closing of each section within the form. Throughout the form there is a series of movements where the practitioner aligns the body, and "opens and closes" (kai-he) the shoulder girdle. One example of Sun's genius was that he knew people practicing a long form could not maintain proper structural integrity throughout, so he added these checkpoints to assist in proper structure to act as a reminder. Structure is key to martial usage, not to mention general overall health maintenance throughout daily life. In the martial sense if one does not have structure, then one cannot absorb nor issue force efficiently. Keep in mind it is no different than building a house; no matter how well-built the frame is, without a solid foundation the frame will crumble to the earth.

Stillness in Motion

One of the first things a practitioner learns in the study of Sun Taiji is the Wuji (carefree) posture. When practicing the form the student starts in Wuji, and ends in Wuji. Wuji is not a static pose, but rather a set of alignments used to ensure proper physical structure is attained and maintained. Some points of reference in regards to Wuji:

- Head is suspended from the crown as if being extended by a balloon attached to a string connected to the crown. This draws in the chin, preventing the chin from protruding, as well as properly extending the cervical vertebrae. Some of the classics refer to this alignment as "Tucking the ears."
- Shoulders are rounded and relaxed, ensuring the chest does not stick out, nor does it slouch. The shoulder blades should feel as if they are going to slough off the back.
- Sternum is kept up as if a hook is underneath it gently pulling up.
- Pelvic girdle has a quality of floating in a fish bowl. This means that the pelvis should not be tucked, nor should the butt be sticking out. There should be no left or right flexion, either. Relaxed and ready to move in any direction.
- Knees are slightly bent and tracking the toes, which means wherever the toes point, the knees should be pointing in the exact same direction. Otherwise a sheering force is put on the knee and can do quite a bit of damage to the soft tissue supporting the knee.
- Feet are flat on the ground, weight evenly distributed with a slight shift towards the balls of the feet.
- Arms are relaxed at the sides with the hands open and slightly curved as if palming a basketball.
The open/closing action done at the close of each section within the form is essentially a Wuji checkpoint that allows the practitioner to check the posture without interrupting the flow of practice. The only physical difference is with open/closing the arms are maintained in front of the body as if holding a ball at chest height, instead of the arms at the sides as in the posture of Wuji.

According to Sun Jianyun, her father had the students stand in the Three Powers Posture (Santi Shi) more so than Wuji. Santi is from the Xingyi boxing school and is basically a more combative version of Wuji. In the Santi posture, the student stands in more of a combat posture with a lead arm and leg, maintaining the same pointers found above with Wuji, but with more of a martial intent and focus. The goal with Santi training is to relax in a combative posture, engaging only the skeletal muscles to stand in the proper posture. The characteristics practiced in Santi are found throughout the Sun Taiji form: again posture and structure being key to the proper usage of combat-oriented martial arts—not to mention all the positive health benefits gained from proper posture throughout daily living!

Other than Wuji and Santi, there are not many basics in Sun Taiji. Again everything the student needs is found within the framework of the form and the practice of applications that are extrapolated from the movements of the form. Sun Lutang had a wonderful reputation throughout China so most of the very experienced, knowledgeable martial artists that trained under Sun were already quite well-versed in the basics of martial combat from their previous training.

**Taiji as Combative Art**

The structure and flow of the form also attests to Sun's intelligent design. The techniques that one would most often use in combat were repeated throughout the entire form, for example Too Lazy to Tie Coat, Hands Strum the Pipa, Single Whip, Repulse Monkey, and Brush Knee Twist Step. Brush Knee Twist Step, and Single Whip alone were the initial movements in every section of the form! The easier techniques were also usually practiced towards the beginning of the form, with the more challenging maneuvers reserved for the final couple of sections.

This is a prime example why many traditionalists take exception to Modern Wushu variations on forms, because techniques are in a certain order, placed carefully within the form that act as keys integral to unlocking the usage of the movement. For instance certain footwork patterns in the solo form are indicators as to how one should apply a kick in combat. If the player does not step to this specific angle, the kick is rendered useless.

All systems of Taiji are combative in nature, training to issue maximum force while using minimal effort, and as much as 80% of the techniques practiced are grappling (or counter-grappling) in nature. Sun Lutang fought many high-level grappling experts in his time (Sun's birthplace, Baoding, was famous for its wrestlers), so by the time he developed Sun Taiji he was well versed in grappling and counter-grappling techniques and the theory on which they are based. As it is today, it was 120 years ago when two combatants engaging in hand-to-hand combat used strikes to close the distance and come into contact with their opponent. Once contact was made (usually in what is now called the “clinch range”) the most proficient fighters used their grappling skills to throw, sweep, or takedown their opponent. This strategy afforded several benefits for the fighter; as any kind of throw is extremely destructive in nature. By utilizing proper technique and leverage, a smaller, weaker fighter can have an advantage over a larger, stronger
opponent. This may not be the case if he chooses to stand and trade blows with his opponent, since the larger, stronger fighter will more likely prevail. That is simple physics. Also keep in mind that at the time, the majority of average civilians in China were laborers who relied on their hands to earn money. A broken hand or foot caused by a fight (or practice for that matter) rendered a person not only injured, but also took him out of work for a period of time.

Throws and the variations such as sweeps, takedowns, and joint manipulation techniques were preferred because they could be practiced without having to “pull” one’s technique (as in the case with strikes), and in actual combat a throw on the hard ground can decisively end a confrontation. It should come as no surprise to the Taiji student, or any martial artist for that matter, that the majority of techniques in Sun Taiji are grappling-based. This is human nature.

One needs to look no further than to watch two untrained people fight. Inevitably one will initiate contact with strikes, while the other will try to protect himself by bringing his arms up to cover his head and face, while simultaneously trying to grab and hold his opponent in an effort to control the strikes that are overwhelming him. Once this is accomplished, the opponents are considered to be in the “clinch” range. Strikes are limited within the clinch so grappling takes precedence as one closes with the opponent, enabling one to join mutual centers of gravity. Once one has joined these centers of gravity, it becomes much easier to manipulate the opponent’s “dead angle” (the angle representing the weakest directions in which a person can be put off-balance). In combat we are constantly trying to control our opponent’s dead angle, while concurrently attempting to hide our own.

Sun Lutang realized that the nature of true combat fell within these parameters and was mindful of including close quarter combat theory and application into his system of Taiji. This was already second nature to him as his Xingyi training included many kao die (literally “knock downs”) type takedowns which are quick and percussive. Also, he learned Bagua from Cheng Tinhua, whose foundation was in Shuai Chiao (Chinese wrestling/grappling), and who was considered one of the best wrestlers of his era. This is not to say striking and kicking are not practiced in the art, as they certainly are very well represented; however, I simply wish to shed some light on the role of grappling in traditional Chinese martial arts.

**TECHNICAL SECTION**

**Rollback / Elbow Strike**

1a) White sets up his attack with a quick back-fist type strike (it is the intention to get the opponent to react, hence the big movement of the back-fist), which of course black blocks.

1b-c) White uses his left hand to parry black’s block, while simultaneously stepping through with his left foot. White has his hand “hooked” onto black’s elbow crease so that when black pushes back against white’s pressure, it assists white in executing the upward elbow (zhou). Usually this elbow lands because of the speed and aggressiveness of the technique, but for argument’s sake black deflects the incoming elbow.

1d) Again using the pressure from black’s defense, white applies Rollback by bringing black’s arm across his body. It may be necessary to shift, or lean slightly back while parrying the opponent’s arm. That is fine as long as one’s structure is not compromised.

1e) White finishes with a simple projection, but really any number of techniques can be applied here.
Reverse Angle of Elbow Strike - Rollback

2a-d: Close up and reverse angle to previous technique.
Joint Manipulation

3a) Here is a joint manipulation application utilizing the splitting principle (lie). Tim (black) and Jake (white) are jockeying for position in grappling range. Neither has a better position, yet notice how black's right arm is on the inside gate of white's left arm.

3b) Black obtains wrist control with his left hand, and sets up the arm drag with his right hand. Notice black reaching high (superior) on white's tricep for the arm drag.

3c) Black switches his grip by sliding along white's arm. As black brings white's arm across his body (to black's right), black's right hand slips down to obtain wrist control, while his left hand slides up just superior to the elbow joint. This is obviously done quickly and decisively, but arm drags are deceiving to their victims in that by the time one notices their position has been compromised—it is too late.

3d) Black maneuvers under white's arm, extending it, applying pressure at the fulcrum which is white's elbow, using white's arm as a lever. Notice how black has also twisted white's arm to black's right. This rotation tightens the joint lock by taking all the slack out of the arm.

Single Whip

4a-b) White attacks black from behind and puts him in an over-arm bear hug. Black lowers his center of gravity.

4c) Black lifts up on the elbows by using his legs, not the strength of his arms.

4d-e) Black steps behind white with his left leg. It is key to keep close contact with the opponent here. This is where black joins centers. Without doing so, black would not be able to disrupt a bigger, stronger opponent's structure. To finish the takedown, black simply turns to his left and white falls from the pressure of black's turn, coupled with the fact that white's mobility is compromised because black has stepped behind him.
Fist Under Elbow

5a) Black offers a right lead jab, which white slips (zuo gu, or "look left").

5b) White strikes low with a straight punch to black's ribs ("Fist Under Elbow").

5c) Black drops his right elbow to block, or possibly as a reaction to white's strike.

5d) White steps behind black, taking his left hand and draping it (thumb down) onto black's eyebrow ridge. Again notice the proximity of the bodies, joining centers once again.

5e) White simply turns his body to the left using a classic "eyebrow mop" type technique as a follow-up. White has superior leverage the closer to the top of black's head he gets, again blocking black from stepping out by using white's left leg. It is very important to use a spiral type action with the "eyebrow mop" takedown, not just turning in a circle.

Open and Closed Fighting Postures

6a) The ending postures for each section of the routine, as divided by Tim Cartmell: open-close (kai-he) is used to realign and reposition the student ensuring the chest is up, head suspended, shoulder blades relaxed, elbows in

6b) Kai-he is the standard and down, hands up, all the attributes of Wuji stance but with the hands held in a fighting position.

6b - detail

fighting position: hands up protecting the head, elbows down and in protecting the body, eyes forward, weight distributed 50/50 on the legs, weight towards the balls of the feet, knees bent and relaxed, and intent forward.
Part Wild Horse’s Mane

7a) Here black initiates a lead arm hook, which white steps off-line to avoid (you pan, or “Gaze Right”) while simultaneously striking with a cross-palm strike.

7b) White quickly steps in and behind black with his left leg, while keeping his left arm taut, thus disrupting black’s structure. Notice there is no gap between the two bodies.

7c) Exploiting black’s dead angle, white simply shifts his weight forward to complete the takedown. It is not necessary for white to turn the body or push with the arm. Positioning the body correctly (with no gaps) joins centers with the opponent. White’s leg prevents black from stepping out, and the pressure into black’s dead angle is what creates the takedown.

Repulse Monkey

8a-b) Black and white square-off in a right lead closed stance. White initiates with a lead arm hook which black covers, and counters with a lead arm palm strike in an effort to get white to react with a block.

8c) Black quickly swings his right arm over, down, and through to obtain his right underhook. Simultaneously black’s left arm clamps down over top of white’s arm, and black has left arm control at the elbow, squeezing white’s arm in-between his body and his left arm. Notice here how black has also toed in his right foot setting up the throw.

8d) Black turns to his left, pulling on white’s right elbow, lifting up with his underhook, and slipping his hip in under white’s center of gravity for the hip throw.

8e) Black finishes with a devastating throw, which flows nicely into a superior position with white’s arm extended, and a knee on white’s ribs. Black can strike, work to submit with an arm bar, or continue the fight on the ground. Repulse Monkey is repeated twice in the Sun Taiji set emphasizing the importance, and applicability of this technique. The influence of Sun’s Bagua is found here as Repulse Monkey is essentially the same movement/technique as the single palm change in Sun Bagua.
Lotus Kick
9a-b) Black and white square off in an open posture, where white throws a lead arm committed jab, which black quickly slips and parries.

9c) Black throws a left hand towards white's face to get him to react with his left hand. Since black is grabbing white's right hand it is natural instinct for white to pull back on his arm when it is grabbed.

9d) Black shoots his right hand across white's body and uses his right hip as a leverage point. By pivoting and twisting in this manner, white's structure is compromised.

9e-f) Black finishes by stepping his right leg behind white and using a combination of joint manipulation and throwing techniques to offer an application from the Lotus Kick. This is an example again of the coupling principle (lie). This is also an excellent example of "knock downs" (kao die) which are fast throws that are not elaborate, nor necessarily difficult. Xingyi is renowned for its usage of kao die, and here we see the influence of Xingyi on Sun Lutang's Taiji.

Step to the Seven Stars
10a) Step to the Seven Stars is an entry technique to get inside your opponents guard. Here white simply does a basic palm strike to black's head causing him to react with a basic block.

10b) White steps forward and weaves his left hand under black's block, opening his guard.

10c) This creates an opening where white can again execute any application, but here employs an elbow technique (remember Taiji is a close-quarter fighting system, so elbows, knees, and grappling are heavily emphasized).
Turn the Body - Ambush the Tiger

11a) Black attacks with a lead arm palm strike, which white quickly blocks.

11b) Black checks white's block, and throws another palm strike towards white's face causing him to block with his left arm now.

11c) Black pulls white's left arm across his body, maintaining wrist control on white's right wrist. Notice how black has toed in his right foot in preparation for the throw, and has white's weight towards his heels to circumvent any counter measures.

11d) Crossing white's arm, keeping them extended, and loading him onto his back like a sack of potatoes. Black now shoots in his hip getting under white's center of gravity and joins centers.

11e) To finish the throw, black loads the weight of white onto him, straightens his leg and turns his right shoulder in the direction toward his left foot.

![Images of the moves](images)

Be careful with this throw as your partner has no way of slapping out of this very large, hard throw!