

The Origin of Lao Jia, Xiao Jia and Xin Jia

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Jas: I have tried to retain my teacher's original voice and style as closely as possible, and I hope I have succeeded to some measure here. However, I do welcome your kind critique so I can keep on improving to write better articles for you! Also, he frequently reverts to classical martial idioms which defy literal translation that I have tried to de-mystify and re-couch simply. Still, I have to say that these phrases like "一动无有不动，一静无有不静"，"灵活运用，随其自然"，"柔转刚发" etc, these are best exemplified in a face-to-face demonstration of thier actual application by a qualified instructor. It's difficult to delineate these where, yi zhao ke bian bai zhao (one move can become hundreds of moves/applications) - from one single chan si lu, you can move into quite a few chin na locks, kao, lie or a cai.

Taijiquan – a martial art which builds health but also trains you to protect yourself in defensive applications, is gaining ever increasing popularity. It shines out brightly as a pearl amongst the myriad diversity that makes up China's martial arts. It is one of the oldest Taijiquan styles to have survived to this day, passing from generation to generation, with a history dating back from more than three hundred years. Today, most will have heard of the five great Taijiquan styles, namely, Chen, Yang, Wu, Sun and Wu as Taijiquan became more and more common. However, it is entirely to the credit of the Yang style which has spread so extensively throughout the world that the little hamlet of Chenjiagou (Chen Village), the birthplace of Taijiquan and comprising just a little over 300 households, has been brought out into the spotlight. As the interest in Taijiquan grows, many Taijiquan lovers both Chinese and foreigners alike seek to trace back its origins.

Of the many Chen routines which have proliferated, there are some who have fabricated "factual" accounts of its origins, in the name of self-interest, although these accounts defy truth and historical authenticity. These fabricated tales have given rise to much controversy and hearsay which detract from actual history. I would now like to offer my personal experience as I observed the evolution of the Taijiquan routines which I learned in Chenjiagou. Please study, examine and come to your own conclusions.

I am the 19th generation bearer of the Chenjiagou Taijiquan lineage, and distant cousin of Chen Xiao Wang and Chen Zhen Lei. From the age of five, I stayed with my granduncle, Chen Guang Lu, who belongs to the 17th generation in the Taijiquan family line and who has never left Chenjiagou for fifty years. In my youth during the fifties, I have often heard recounts of martial exploits of my ancestors from my

granduncle. He would tell of how Chen Wanting fought in the battlefields, how Chen Jing Bai died of exhaustion from killing a black tiger with his bare hands, how Chen Xu Xia took a disciple and killed the "Big Headed King", about Chen Fake and his powerful Fa Jin, Chen Bao Huan and many more, all of which I never forgot. At that time, the most famous Grandmasters in Chenjiagou were Chen Yun Ting of the 17th generation, and the rest from the 18th generation batch were Chen Zhao Kui, Chen Zhao Pi, Chen Ke Zhong and Wang Yan. I would also often watch these masters teaching their young charges. As I watched, I gradually developed an interest in Taijiquan. Back then, the old Grandmasters imparted only two types of routines to their charges. They taught only the 72-movement Lao Jia (also known as Da Jia or Big Routine), and 72-movement Xiao Jia (also known as Xin Jia then). The more advanced Er Lu (also known as Pao Chui) falls under the Lao Jia category. So, there were only two types of category in the old days. You either learnt the Lao Jia or Xiao Jia.

In 1958, when Grandmaster Chen Zhao Pi retired back to Chenjiagou, I began formal training under him for Lao Jia Yi Lu. My fellow student disciples were Chen De Wang, Chen Chun Lei, Chen Xiao Wang, Chen Qing Hua, Chen Mong Song, Wang Xi An, and Zhang Guang Cai. We had to practice everyday, come rain or shine. It was only in our third year of training that we were allowed to learn Er Lu (Pao Chui), Pushing Hands, and weaponry. We were also very close to the other group of student disciples who were trained in Xiao Jia under Grandmaster, Chen Ke Zhong, an 18th generation Grandmaster. Our fellow Xiao Jia cohort comprised of Chen Bai Xiang, Chen Tu Sheng, Chen Liu You, Chen Tu Yuan, Chen Qi Liang, and Chen Qing Huan. Both Grandmasters Chen Zhao Kui and Chen Ke Zhong would often bring all of us along for performances, training sessions and workshops together.

During my training with Grandmaster Chen Zhao Pi, he would keep stressing to us the importance of Lao Jia Yi Lu as the quintessential skill-building routine. He would emphasize that within its predominantly gentle focus; it contains an inherent force, whereas in the further Er Lu routine, it would train us in an opposing manner. Er Lu focuses on the forcefulness within us, but there is gentleness carried in the force. This was how our ancestors passed down the skills to us from generation to generation, imparting to us just these two fundamental routines, Yi Lu and Er Lu. Each movement must be learnt separately and correctly first before practicing them together in a continuous flow as a set. The training principles must be adhered to rigorously and each move needs to be carefully studied and practiced over and over again so you keep gaining new insights each time as you learn them. We had to try and apply the principles as we practiced each move over and over again. Each move must be practiced such that it originates from the Kua, the groin area (一定要认真细心的慢慢揣摩处处走弧行). For example, we had to move in such a way that we did not move in a straight line but in a circular movement (螺旋缠丝, 没有直线, 没有平面). In our spiral silk reeling; we started first with drawing big circular movements, and then as we improved, we slowly reduced the radius of the circles as we progress in our training (由大圈到中圈, 由中圈到小圈). All our movements had to be very precise without over extending or breaking the line of energy in the body (不丢不顶). We have been practicing the routines with these principles in mind for at least ten years before we were allowed to proceed to tui shou or push hand (推手) and weaponry (兵器) training. As to Xiao Jia (small frame), we too had gained an in-depth understanding. The sequences in the Xiao Jia routine are similar to Lao Jia (old

frame), and both share the same routine names except that Xiao Jia's circular movements are much smaller, and all the martial application have been hidden. More emphasis is placed on the intention. In training, the Xiao Jia stance depends on how much effort you are putting in (in other words, how much gongfu you want to achieve at the end of the day). So, you can select and practice with a high, mid or low stance. Although visually its movements may seem different in comparison to Lao Jia, but both are undeniably based on the same taiji principles, hence, there are a lot of good martial artists both from the Xiao Jia and Lao Jia groups in Chenjiagou.

So, how did the Xiao Jia routine come to be in Chenjiagou? According to our village elders, in the days before the introduction of guns and cannons into China, martial art training was extremely tough. There was a proverbial saying "The poor will study hard while the rich will have leisure to learn martial art" (穷习文, 富练武). When learning a martial art, fitness and vitality is required. Next, an open and alert mind is called for to grasp the meaning behind the theories which are usually not straightforward. Then, one had to train under a good teacher, and be more hardworking than the average, (夏练三暑、冬练三九). Only then, will a person be able to achieve a superior level of skill. The Chenjiagou family of Taijiquan is a highly refined martial art which helps to develop a person at two levels. It improves health while at the same time, it trains you for self-defense. As a martial art, it is extremely effective in its use of body mechanics. This is why you can use the Taijiquan technique of bluff to get the opponent to strike first thinking he has got you at a weak spot but you can easily divert his energy against himself instead, or use one ounce of energy to counter a thousand-pound strike. A Taijiquan master who is highly skilled will be able to transmute an external, hard force into a gentle one. Hence, many Taijiquan grandmasters in their twilight years, who have reached the peak of their skills, choose to simply recycle the internal energy (丹田之灵气) within their body instead of expelling it (Fa Jin, 发劲) when they practice. When practiced in this manner, Taijiquan helps to loosen the joints, improve dexterity and promotes longevity. Thus, when the elders practiced Lao Jia, they preferred not to release the force for those Fa Jin or force-expelling movements (e.g., zhen jiao 震脚, foot-stamp) and instead, channeled the force back within, just concentrating on the circularity of the moves and the natural flow of qi. So, this was how Xiao Jia came to be. However, for young people who take up Xiao Jia for training, it is advised that they practice it with a low stance. And to train up their energy, they need to practice the force-expelling moves in solo. The Xiao Jia routine was developed by our 14th generation Grandmaster, Chen You Ben, and this was how it had been passed down for the past hundred over years. Famous Xia Jia Grandmasters were many and included Chen Zhong Sheng, Chen Li Sheng, Chen Qing Ping, Chen Tu, Chen Jin, Chen Zhi Ming, Chen Ke Zhong etc. The Chenjiagou Xia Jia form taught by Chen Qing Ping has been the base which gave rise to many variants such as the Zhao Bao style, Wu style, and Hu Lei Style.

The 72-movement Lao Jia has endured as the oldest form through the passage of time. It has remained as the archetypical skill foundation where it trains you across a broad spectrum of martial basics. Its movements consist of a complementing blend of force and gentleness. As you develop ever further into its training, you will progress from a form and structure governed by Taijiquan principles to one that is formless and without boundaries. Typically, the learner should go through three stages of development and five level of skills. As soon as you achieve your next level, you will discover a new dimension of awareness and understanding. The more you practice,

the more you learn and discover new insights, in a never-ending cycle. Due to its health benefits, the Lao Jia routine is truly a fascinating form which has found followers in both young and young. To date, Chenjiagou Taijiquan has now spawned its 22nd generation of disciples. It started with the 14th generation Grandmaster Chen Chang Xing who fostered a group of prominent disciples whom included Chen Geng Yun , Chen Yan Nian, Chen Yan Xi , Yang Lu Chan, Chen Fa Ke, Chen Zhao Pi, Chen Zhao Xuan, Chen Zhao Kui. Then in 1928, when Grandmaster Chen Fa Ke went to Beijing to teach Taijiquan, it was there that he coached a group of disciples who made a name for themselves; Hong Jun Sheng, Tian Xiu Cheng , Lei Mu Ni, and Feng Zhi Qiang. It was only after China opened up to the world that Taijiquan gained importance in China, and began to attract international interest. Many international exchanges started up in Chenjiagou with students from all over the world coming to learn Chenjiagou Taijiquan. It was also at this time that the four flag bearers of Chenjiagou Taijiquan, Chen Xiao Wang, Zhu Tian Cai, Wang Xian An, and Chen Zheng Lei, went forth out of China to teach Taijiquan. Through our many years of training, all four of us have found our own styles which are evident in our performances of the Chen style routines, but ultimately, we have faithfully retained the original flavour of Lao Jia Yi Lu as our forefathers have taught us. There's a proverbial saying that one may learn a person's style but not his unique ability (学人姿势，不能学人巧), so it is that the four of us have developed our own particular Taijiquan specialties.

Now why is it that there is the appearance of a 83-movement Xin Jia routine? To answer this, we have to go back to 1960, when 18th generation Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui came back from Beijing to Chenjiagou for a short break before going up to Shanghai to teach again. Back home at Chenjiagou for a few months, he took the time to analyze and share the Taijiquan techniques and teaching experiences he had with Grandmaster Chen Zhao Pi. During that period when Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui went out to teach, it was also his first time teaching out of Chenjiagou. Back then, all of us youngsters had never seen him performing his Taijiquan routine and did not have the slightest idea what it looked like. Also, we had not been formally accepted as disciples as yet, so we were not too concerned with this, and we just listened to stories of Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui. Up till 1972, when China began stirring up wushu activities, this was when Grandmaster Chen Zhao Pi passed away. It was with his passing that all of us felt a pressing urgency to keep the fire burning for Chenjiagou Taijiquan and to carry on the lineage. And In 1973, the village recalled Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui to return and formally cultivate a group of disciples. The village then organized free Taijiquan classes to all Chenjiagou villagers whom were interested to learn. Overall, within those 3 months, near to two hundred over villagers had learnt the 83-movement routine particular to Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui. At that time, a group of us, myself, Chen Xiao Wang, Wang Xi An, Chen Zheng Lei, and Chen Li Zhou were selected for intensive training. We would learn together in the mass class in the mornings, whilst at night, we would go for our extra training. In the evenings, our teacher corrected each and everyone one of our movements individually as we trained, martial theories were explained and imparted, and started us on Er Lu and Push Hands. Since each of us had already more than ten years of Lao Jia training experience behind us, we managed to learn the 83-movement routine very quickly, and in the process, also gained many new insights and deepened our knowledge of Taijiquan.

Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui would tell us about his own experience in learning

about his own 83- movement routine. He told us that it is a routine in opposition, with contrasting fast and slow movements, with some moves designed to store energy, and following movements to expel energy. For each movement, it must begin with the roots or base. Hence, the movement for the hands must first begin from the wrist joint (手活于腕) and arm movements must start from the shoulder joints (转关在肩). He taught us how to circle gently first in order to generate strikes forcefully (柔转刚发). He explained to us why we should strive for a straight axis in our circularity and strive for roundness in our level movements (圆中有直, 直中求圆). (*Jas' note : This is the straight axis of force as we spiral out a punch or a strike using the Chenjiagou silk-reeling technique (chan si gong)*) He also trained us in defensive fighting, striking, and jump-kicks. The 83-movement routine was designed with a young person in mind, to capture the interest of young people. Thereby, all the attacking movements in Lao Jia is intentionally brought out and displayed in the 83-movement to exemplify the martial applications inherent in the circular moves of Lao Jia.

From 1973 to 1980, Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui came back to Chenjiagou more than ten times to personally check on us, revise and refine our training progress. At that time, each district, city, and province were actively conducting contests and demonstrations all over China. In order to show the uniqueness of Chenjiagou Taijiquan whenever we contested or performed, we always registered Lao Jia, Er Lu, the 83-movement which we named Xin Jia, and Xin Jia Er Lu. Since our Grandmaster Chen Zhao Kui was inadvertently around whenever we registered our routines, he has never once raised any objections to our naming convention for the 83-movement routines. Eventually, even his own son, Chen Yu also called the 83-movement routine as Xin Jia Yi Lu.

According to our village records and the verbal accounts from our ancestors, there were originally five types of fist routine, five types of cannon fist, fifteen types of Hong fist and fifteen types of cannon fist (Pao) routines. Later, the five fist and five cannon fist routines were combined into one single routine which became the 72-movement Lao Jia Yi Lu. Then, the fifteen types of Hong fist and fifteen types of cannon fist (Pao) routines were also merged to form the Lao Jia Er Lu routine, which was also called Pao Chui or cannon fist.

Within the Chenjiagou family of routines, although there is a differentiation of Lao Jia, Xin Jia and Xiao Jia, essentially, their operation and application stem from the same Taijiquan principles. Through all these years, from my time of training till now, the method of training has not been changed. We will always start with Lao Jia Yi Lu, perfecting each posture towards the requirement, correcting each move, understanding when to shift the center of gravity from one foot to another (虚实分明). As one becomes familiar with the form and performs it correctly, the moves become rounder and wider, in tune with your own rhythm. Once you internalize the Taijiquan principles, and it becomes second nature to you (不丢不顶), you begin to experiment with the form itself, that is, your form becomes formless (有规矩而脱规). When your internal and external are in harmony (内外合一), you will be able to express an internal principle into an external movement or a physical application at will (灵活运用, 随其自然). In Xiao Jia, the circles are smaller, faster, gentler but also strong. Its focus is more on mind intent to control the flow of Qi and its objective is to try and complete the routine as one continuous flow. In Xin Jia, the emphasis on the wrist and the hand as explained above. Despite their characteristic differences, all three

categories adhere faithfully to the basic rules of *peng, lu ji, an, cai, lie, zhou, kao, zhan, lian, tie, sui, rou, huo, song, yuan*. (*Jas' note: these are the fundamental, techniques which form the primary core from which either one or a combination of techniques is worked into the Taijiquan routine - this would take me into another long digression here!*) The waist is the primary, central axis in Lao Jia, Xin Jia and Xiao Jia and is the base from which all movement begins (以腰为主宰). When practicing any routine within these three categories of Lao Jia, Xin Jia and Xiao Jia, the primary training principles still hold. That is, using your waist as the turning axis, your body should be interconnected and aligned such that when one part of the body changes every part of the body changes in tandem along with it (一动无有不动, 一静无有不静), using your correct posture to facilitate the generation of *Qi*, and then letting your *Qi* trigger your movements, ensuring that your body line of both your upper body and lower body is not broken, and striving to complete the routine in one single, continuous flow without breaking your rhythm or your *qi*.

The secret to Chenjiagou Taijiquan lies in its particular spiral silk reeling force which is unique in the martial arts world. Hence, be it Xiao Jia, Xin Jia, or Lao Jia, they all possess this characteristic which differentiates them from other styles.

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