

Supplement to the Title: Taijiquan's Enigma

Is Taijiquan a martial art or a dance?

C.P. Ong

After Xiaodong Xu, a Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighter, summarily crushed Wei Lei, a self-proclaimed Taijiquan grandmaster, in 10 seconds, he mocked Taijiquan, as well as other traditional kungfu arts as mostly fake and ineffective in combat [1]. The humiliation of the defeat and the put-down of the traditional arts touched a raw nerve. The wushu community was thrown into a convulsion and the Chinese social media went viral. The cultural comfort of the sacred belief of kungfu's superiority was shaken at the very core. The furor raged on for days and so consumed the cyberspace that the Chinese authorities shut down the debate and deactivated Xu's Weibo (internet) account.

There was nothing particularly noteworthy of the martial skills in the fight. The only thing remarkable about the fight was that it was unremarkable—the Taiji guy was shoved to the ground by the MMA fighter's flurry of quick punches and was then mercilessly groundpounded out without fanfare. It was obvious that Wei Lei had little or no experience in the combat ring and was woefully unprepared on the ground. Nevertheless, the lopsided match whipped up a tsunami of emotions, forcing a reexamination of traditional wushu as a combat art. "Can Taijiquan be effective in real combat?"

The Taiji-MMA fight is reminiscent of a similar match between a Japanese Aikido-cum-Kiai (Qi) master and an MMA fighter, where the MMA person pummeled the hapless Aikido guy in what could best be described as a pathetic one-sided fight [2].

Tantei File, a Japanese fringe magazine given to sensationalism, had featured a 64-year old Aikido master, Yanagi Ryuken, who claimed a fighting record of 200-0 wins and to have the Kiai-Qi power to ward off attackers by the wave of his hands without contact. Eager to capitalize on the magazine promotion, Yanagi offered a million yen (\$10,000) to any fighter who could defeat him. As it turned out, the magazine columnist was training in a gym with Tsuyoshi Iwakura, a 36-year old aspiring to be an MMA fighter who was only too willing to be enlisted [3]. The match took place on Nov 26, 2006. Yanagi

was slaughtered by Iwakura just as Taiji Lei would be some ten years later. Yanagi's Qi-power that had stopped his students charging at him in their tracks, failed to shield Iwakura's punches from striking and bloodying his face.

The match is viewed on YouTube mainly as a testimony that debunks non-touch Qi-power, not as an Aikido-MMA matchup. The event did stir up some consternation, but nothing close to the explosive sensation of the Xu-Lei fight.

A match that is more exemplary of martial skills is the one pitting the colossal might of sumo against the nimbleness of ground-fighting Brazilian JiuJitsu (BJJ) [4]. The fight was the main feature of a 2004 New Year's Eve extravaganza celebration, debuting Akebono Taro in the MMA ring. Akebono, a Hawaiian, became a legend as the first non-Japanese to be inducted into most coveted and highest sumo rank of Yokozuna (Grand Champion).

His opponent, Royce Gracie, was a three-time UFC Champion. He is one of the stable of successful second-generation Gracie fighters. The Gracie family (Carlos and Helio Gracie) had taken the "soft" Japanese martial arts, jujutsu, and forged it through real combat challenges with other martial arts and street fights to develop the new BJJ fighting art.

Royce Gracie, 6' 1" and 180 lbs, had strategized that his advantage was on the ground. But as much as he was mentally prepared, he could not be sure of the 6' 8" and 486 lb behemoth mounting fully on him on the ground. Seconds into the round, Gracie forced the fight onto the ground. With the massive sumo body plumped on top of his chest, the audience was left tantalizing as to whether he would be smothered underneath. But Gracie was able to wriggle and slide out without much difficulty. He knew then and there that he had control of the fight. Seconds later, he forayed from below and forced the fight on the ground with him trapped underneath again. This time he knew he was in no danger and took his time to arm-lock Akebono's arm by maneuvering his leg around to leverage it, forcing a submission in just 2 minutes and 13 seconds. On the ground, Akebono



Akebono towering over Gracie

simply had no chance to apply his sumo skills which served him well in the dohyo ring of 15 ft diameter.

Sumo is a national sport of Japan, rich in history and steeped in tradition. The staging of the ceremonial rituals at the start of each sumo championship, complete with the distinctive topknots worn by the rikishis (wrestlers), is a throwback to medieval Japan. And Akebono was a bona fide sumo superstar. Yet, there was no hue and cry from the sumo-adoring public, lamenting over the loss of face or the efficacy of sumo-combat, as that would be engendered by the Xu-Lei fight some 12 years later. The rigid official hierarchy and cultural keepers of the sumo sport were no doubt chastened by the yokozuna's abuse of his sumo celebrity to profit himself. (Reportedly, he was forced to by circumstances of his enormous debts.)

The Xu-Lei fight came about as a result of Xu calling out Lei's claim that he could free himself from any choke-hold. Lei, a self-styled founder and grandmaster of the Lei Thunder Taiji, had also published an online video clip of his Qi-

power, which demonstrated his strike, purportedly penetrating and squishing the inside of a watermelon without squashing it and, another, of a pigeon unable to take flight from his palm. Lei's thrashing by Xu was well-deserved as he was trolling the MMA fighter on the internet. Despite his loss, he later still insisted that he refrained from using his Qi-power that could be lethal to his opponent.

The wushu community's outrage against Xu was not in defense of Lei. It was a reaction of the community's collective psyche to Xu's tirade of insults that the traditional arts, particularly Taijiquan, were useless in real combat.

Taiji Push-hands Training

Push-hands practice is Taijiquan's answer to mitigate injuries attendant in combat sparring. It starts with choreographed patterns of exchange between partners, which then moves on to freer and less restrictive format. The push-hands exchange tests and hones the players' comprehension and use of the eight jin-forces categorized in Taijiquan theory as:



Author in push-hand play with Grandmaster Zhenglei Chen at a Zion National Park scene in Utah, USA

the four cardinal jins of Peng, Lu, Ji, An, and the four auxiliary ones of Cai, Lie, Zhou, Kao [5]. The reader is referred to the many video links on YouTube that explain and demonstrate the practice [6].

Taijiquan's push-hands practice may seem very limited, but the training of the eight-jin methods is drawn on neijin, which in totality, cover comprehensively, interactions of offense and defense in contact-range combat. More crucially, the push-hands practice drills in the core principle of "using softness to overcome hardness" (Yi Rou Ke Gang) of Taijiquan combat.

The principle gives basis to the strategy of not fighting back "force with force," but of "yielding" to follow the opponent and not lose contact. It is the combat response of zhan nian lian sui "sticking, gluing, adhering and following," to flow with the opponent's actions, which in each instance trains a response of the right force vector of the eight jins.

In other words, the plying of the eight jins in push-hands practice not only emulates the interactions of offense and defense, but serves to further imbue the principle of inner balance in a dynamic setting.

The strategy is to await a faltering by the opponent, upon which the opportunity is seized instantaneously to launch a counter-offense—De Ji De Shi. Taijiquan combat training is not just about a repertoire of techniques, but the response of the right force vector of the eight jins to emerge in the martial applications.

Therefore, Taijiquan training is not preoccupied with any specific skill set of combat techniques but is centered in the cultivation neijin and qi. Complemented with push-hands of mastering the eight jins, neijin makes a Taijiquan warrior unconquerable, built on strength (Jin), techniques (Jiqiao), and spirit (Shen). The high cost is that it takes kungfu—time and effort—to forge a warrior.

However, the blazing speed of strikes and kicks are

real and would have devastating consequences when they land solidly on target. That is why the Gracie fighters go for a takedown at the earliest opportunity, forcing a grappling or ground fighting, where strikes and kicks are immobilized. As well-trained as a Taijiquan warrior may be, the real test is in the combat realities outside of the familiarities of push-hands practice.

The Taijiquan traditions have produced many kungfu heroes. Unfortunately, we only have the tales of their martial feats, no doubt embellished, to regale us with [7]. Martial skills have long been sidelined by weapons of firepower in the security and military business. Nevertheless, Chinese martial arts continue to be passed down by tradition and culture. The current generation of kungfu masters born in the forties, had little or no avenues of open contest in China until the 80s when sanda and push-hands competitions began to be organized by the Chinese sports authorities.

The First All-China Taijiquan Push-hand Competition took place in Beijing in 1982 [8]. Representing the Henan Province were Chen Xiaowang and Wang Xi'an, of the Chen Village. Chen Xiaowang, at his prime and brimming with qi enthusiasm, quickly flipped his opponent to the ground without ceremony, but by an ironic twist of competition rules, the fallen person was declared the winner, and the one who executed in what could only be described as a most impressive Lie Jin (one of Taijiquan's eight jins), was disqualified. Chen Xiaowang was faulted for having placed his hand over the opponent's shoulder, deemed as having applied a hooking-hold on the neck. The highly restrictive rules were set up to avoid the serious injuries that Taijiquan could inflict and to bring out the spirit of the combat principle of using "softness to overcome hardness." A primary concern was that the match not become a brawl of shoving and pushing.

Can a push-hand champion prevail in an MMA arena? Brawny strength is an intimidating factor, but what carries the day in the ring are the martial skills. The decisive factors are not the speed and strength in absolute but relative terms—the relative advantage harnessed by the fighters. Strategy is critical and pivotal to any strategy is the liveliness of the body to change and maneuver to generate the leverage of the

right force vector in the combat response, seized in timeliness of the opportunity when it arises.

That is the *raison d'être* of Taijiquan's *neijin*. Therefore, Taijiquan aficionados can rest assured that Taijiquan as a combat art is not fake, but not everyone who practices Taijiquan can fight. From the perspective of science, *neijin*'s response of the right force vector in combat makes Taijiquan a very formidable kungfu art, but it does not promise that a Taijiquan master is invincible. Although no fighters attributable to Chinese kungfu styles have emerged at the top ranks in the MMA arena, the economics of big prize money and fame would in due course draw out more kungfu or Taijiquan talents. At present, a huge kungfu industry has grown with career opportunities in movies, entertainment, security, and coaching. As Jet Li, the superstar of kungfu movies, observes, the present lure of wushu practitioners is not to fight but to breakout in performance into the silver screen.

References

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