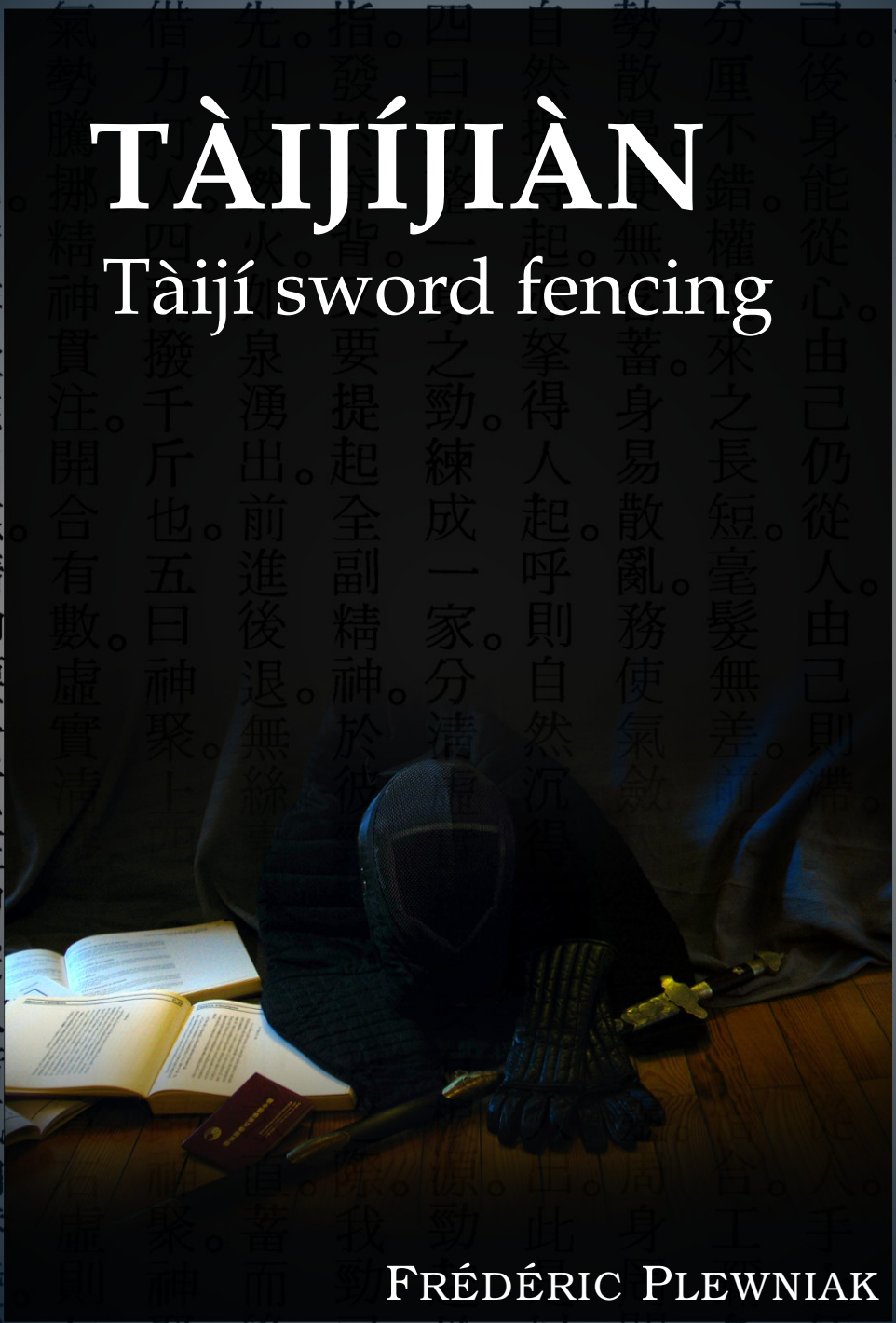
TÀIJÍJIÀN

Tàijí sword fencing



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Frédéric Plewniak

April 2, 2020

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Preface

In most styles and schools, Tàijíjiàn is studied quite exclusively as routines and most of the time without much consideration for its martial roots. Although we see now a growing interest in two-person drills, mainly in the form of sticking sword exercises, martial applications are very rarely demonstrated and are often limited to martial explanations and justifications of the routine movements. What may be truly called Tàijíjiàn fencing is even more rarely evoked or practised.

The present work is an attempt to bridge the gap between Tàijí sword form practice and Tàijíjiàn fencing. It is the result of nearly fifteen years of research and experimentation, trying to uncover the martial dimensions of Tàijíjiàn, from fencing basics and martial applications of the form through free sparring with respect for the Tàijí principles. The sources of this work are rooted in the Yángjiā Mìchuán Tàijíjiàn tradition as transmitted by Master Wang Yen-nien, and mainly the Kūnlún sword routine, also known in this style as the *Old Sword Form*. Historical European fencing from the XIII$^{\text{th}}$ to the XVIII$^{\text{th}}$ centuries also provided valuable inspiration. This might seem strange at first sight, but actually, European fencing treatises of past centuries do remind sometimes of our Tàijí classics and a good deal of European techniques present striking similarities to those found in Tàijí sword forms. In particular, applying to the Kūnlún routine form the concept of *fencing phrase* which describes fencing actions as if it were a conversation, allowed me to discover convincing martial applications for most movements of this form. In all those cross-cultural experimentations though, my guides have always been the Tàijí principles, Tàijí classics and Master Wang Yen-nien's precepts. I did not have the

luck to be a direct student of Master Wang, however his books and my notes from the few workshops I could attend contain a wealth of enlightening information. I also owe my teachers, who had been his direct students and truthfully transmitted his teachings, an immense debt of gratitude. I do believe therefore that the sword techniques and notions you will find in these pages can confidently be considered as appropriate Tàijí sword techniques, respectful of principles, even though some may have been elucidated thanks to unrelated but nonetheless convergent sources.

This is still a work in progress and in constant evolution. I do not pretend to hold the absolute truth nor to have succeeded in reconstructing genuine historically accurate Tàijí sword techniques. Actually, I do not care, this was not my goal. The only thing that really matters to me is how this work can help improving Tàijíjiàn practice and the comprehension of Tàijí principles. Today, I have the feeling that this work is consistent at last and worth sharing with all those interested no matter the style they practice.

As I considered publishing my work, doing so for free in the form of a web site soon became self-evident. It would ensure a wide diffusion while at the same time avoid all the hassle of book printing. Another important reason was that, before you can actually appear in print, you have to write the book from beginning to end first. A web site, on the opposite, can start with partial content and may be easily updated and augmented gradually with new material. Last but not least, a web site would allow better integration of various media such as video. However, since off-line reading might be desirable sometimes, downloadable versions will also be made available in epub and PDF formats. The choice of the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND licence was also an evident response to the same concerns. Derivative works and commercial distribution are not allowed without my prior consent but unmodified content may otherwise be freely redistributed provided proper credit is given.

Hoping that this work will prove itself useful to practitioners and may spark off new vocations.

Frédéric Plewniak, January 2014.

Part I

Generalities

Chapter 1

The Chinese sword

Broadly, a sword can be defined as a cutting and thrusting edged weapon with a blade at least as long as the arm and a short handle.

There is archaeological evidence of the use of swords dating back as far as the Bronze Age, both in the Occidental world and in China.

From these early times to the beginning of the XX^{th} century when they ceased to be used for combat, swords have evolved in parallel with fighting techniques and strategies. The swordsmanship of any particular historical period was adapted to the currently available types of swords while being at the same time deeply rooted in its social and cultural context.

Thus, Tàijíjiàn adopted the kind of straight double-edge swords, or Jiàn, that were being commonly used at the time by every Chinese martial art. Although there had never been in historical times any sword specifically tailored for the practice of Tàijíjiàn, this Chinese double-edged sword is nowadays often abusively denoted by the term Tàijí sword.

From the battlefield to the public park

I will not get deep into historical considerations about Chinese swordsmanship. Others, more knowledgeable on the subject than I am, have already published works more accurate and extensive than anything I could write here. For a more detailed account, I can only refer the interested reader to Peter Lorge's book *Chinese Martial Arts: from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* and

Scott Rodell's *Chinese Swordsmanship*.

After having dominated Chinese battlefields until the late XIXth and early XXth century, edged weapons were eventually superseded by modern firearms and artillery. Practical sword fencing rapidly declined during the early XXth century. Chén Wēimíng, in his book *Taiji sword*, first published in 1928, mentions fencing only to say that Yáng Chéngfǔ never taught any sword fencing set, and that he would himself write another sword book when he becomes proficient in it. As far as I can tell, this book was never written. During the 1930s and 1940s, Chinese sword manuals lament that this ancient art was almost completely lost.

At the same period, as China was falling under the influence of Western Empires, invaded by Japanese troops, then ravaged by the Civil War, Chinese martial arts were becoming symbols of national pride while gradually turning into disciplines for physical education, health and self cultivation.

Boxing and wrestling soon overtook weapon training, which was reduced to a mere form practice and a complement to unarmed martial arts. The primary goal of Chinese martial arts instructors was not to train combatants any more, but to strengthen their nation by invigorating their fellow compatriots while expressing the superiority of Chinese tradition. Practical fencing was not sought, but swift and athletic demonstrative movements started to be favoured over effectiveness in combat. Light swords with extremely flexible blades were more and more commonly used and somewhat became the norm.

Though there is to my knowledge no written mention of a martial art called Tàijíquán before the XIXth century, the Tàijí principles had certainly been around for quite a long time when they were gathered into a whole coherent martial system, supposedly by the Chén family of Chénjiāgōu, and later formalised by scholars in the texts we know today as the Tàijí Classics.

The general Qī Jìguāng (1527–1587), as early as the XVIth century, cites in his *New Manual on Military Efficiency* technique names that should sound familiar to every Tàijíquán practitioner. It is unclear, however, whether Qī Jìguāng was actually writing about Tàijíquán, or its ancestor, or whether it was a mere coincidence or a later reuse of technique names.

In any case, it is generally admitted that Tàijíquán emerged

and developed between late XVIIth and the XIXth century, during the Míng and Qīng dynasties.

The Yángjiā Mìchuán style, root of the present work, was created by Yáng Lùchán, presumably during the first half of the XIXth century. I have no clear evidence that the Yángjiā Mìchuán Kūnlún sword form originates from this period, but the rhymes that describe the movements seem to point to a rather ancient origin. Qī Jìguāng's treatise contains indeed a collection of such rhymes that were used as mnemonics for routine practice.

Originally, forms had been used for training troops of soldiers to manoeuvre and fight in unison. However, as early as during the Táng dynasty, training sessions shifted towards a sort of martial spectacle, not only for military power display, but also as a mere entertainment. In order to please spectators who often were not martial artists themselves, forms increasingly incorporated demonstrative techniques that would be much more spectacular or aesthetic than truly effective. This interest for martial spectacles has persisted to this day in literature, Chinese Opera, cinema, and, of course, in the unavoidable demonstrations performed during Martial Arts gatherings.

Nowadays, like any other Chinese martial art, Tàijíjiàn has definitely left the battlefield for the public park and sword training is fortunately anything but a preparation to combat.

Despite their undeniable aesthetic dimension, however, traditional Tàijíjiàn forms were originally designed to develop martial skills based on the Tàijí principles, effectively using swords whose weight, dimensions and balance achieved a compromise between cutting power, thrusting precision, and swift movements.

Anatomy of the Jiàn

The figure 1.1 shows the disassembled parts of a Jiàn, or Chinese double-edged sword, typical of the Míng and Qīng dynasties.

The main particularity of the Jiàn's blade is its very gradual taper with nearly parallel cutting edges. From approximately 3 or 4 cm at the base, the blade width decreases only to 2 or 3 cm near the tip, where the edges curve rapidly into a sharp point. With a blade length of 70 to 80 cm, the angle between both edges is hardly noticeable, in sharp contrast to the more triangular shape of many

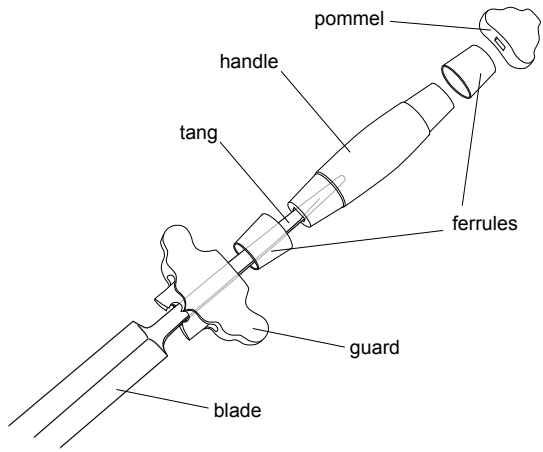

Fig. 1.1 – Sword parts: The double-edged straight blade is extended by the tang, traversing the guard, handle and pommel where it is secured by peening. The two ferrules are metallic rings preventing the extremities of the handle from splitting open. The guard protects the hand holding the sword. Usually made of bronze or a similar metal, it is hollow and open towards the front. The handle, generally made of wood, is spindle-shaped and sometimes covered with a string, leather or ray skin in order to prevent the grip from slipping. The pommel, made of the same metal as the guard plays a crucial role in the sword's balance and behaviour by counterbalancing the weight of the blade.

European mediaeval swords

Traditionally, the section of the blade could be either lenticular or diamond-shaped with a clearly marked central ridge. Some blades could also have a fuller, which is often wrongly called *blood groove* because of the legend pretending that its role was to let the blood flow out of the wound. Another delusion about the fuller is that it would prevent the blade from being stuck in the wound because of a supposed phenomenon of suction or a hypothetical contraction of the severed muscles. I must say that I do have serious doubts about the capacity of a wounded muscle to contract significantly around a sharp blade without suffering any further damage. And assuming it could, there is certainly no reason why the blade could not cut its way out quite easily.

The truth is far less enthralling: a fuller simply makes a lighter blade without compromising its solidity. Of course, the easiest way to reduce blade weight is to make it thinner. This, however, is

limited by the resulting increase in flexibility, which might not be desirable beyond some degree. It also flattens the edge geometry, which might in turn affect edge durability. The fuller permits a lighter blade without at the same time affecting flexibility and edge geometry. For example, a fuller 1 cm wide and 2 mm deep, running along two thirds of a 75 cm blade with a lenticular section, would have a volume of approximately 10 cm^3. As steel density ranges from 7.3 kg/dm^3 to 7.8 kg/dm^3 depending on its composition and heat treatment, such a fuller on each side of the blade would reduce its weight by about 150 g without affecting the profile of its edges. (see figure 1.2) This could certainly make a difference considering that a lighter blade would also mean lighter fittings. Thus, this fuller would allow a swordsmith to make a 900 g sword, the typical weight of a historical Jiàn, with the same edge profile and blade length as a non-fullered sword weighing over 1 kg.

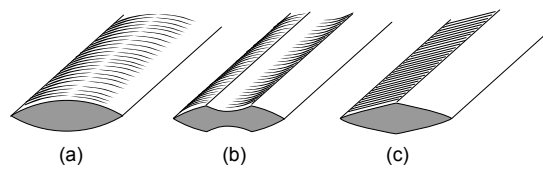

Fig. 1.2 – Blade sections: (a) Lenticular, or apple-seed. (b) This fullered lenticular blade has the same edge profile as the blade shown in (a), but it is significantly lighter thanks to the fuller. (c) Diamond-shaped.
NB: for a clearer picture, the blade thickness has been exaggerated on this figure.

If the blade profile may have an effect on edge durability, the kind of steel the blade is made of will also affect edge strength. If the steel is too soft, edges may bend and become dull after only a few cuts. Hardened steel is necessary for keeping the edges sharp, but it is also brittle and a blade cannot be made exclusively of hard steel. A compromise had thus to be found between blade hardness, softness and elasticity.

Note that elasticity is not a synonym for flexibility: it is the capacity of the blade to bend and return to its original shape. If the limit of elasticity is exceeded, the blade is permanently deformed or breaks.

The blade must be hard enough for keeping its edges and at the

same time sufficiently resilient and elastic so as to sustain strong blows and shocks without breaking nor taking an unwanted bend.

Steel is basically a mixture of iron and a very small proportion of carbon, between 0.1% to 2%. It can also be alloyed with a small amount of other metals such as chromium, nickel, manganese, etc. Even in such small quantities, these elements may, in conjunction with heat treatment, dramatically change steel mechanical properties.

Quenching is a process consisting in heating the blade at a high temperature and then cooling it down rapidly by immersion into water. Following this treatment, steel assumes a particular crystal structure which makes it harder, but also more fragile. Furthermore, since it is impossible to cool instantly and homogeneously the whole blade at once, quenching also creates persistent tensions in the metal that may greatly weaken the blade. To release these constraints without reverting the hardening effect of quenching, it is possible to apply a second heat treatment, called tempering. It consists in reheating the blade at a lower temperature before leaving it to cool down naturally, so as to recover sufficient resilience.

An alternative to these two successive treatments is the technique called differential tempering. Well-known for being the traditional way of Japanese swords making, this technique was originally used also in China. In differential tempering only the edges are exposed to the quenching treatment thanks to the application of clay onto the core of the blade, which is thus protected from the heat shock and remains elastic while the edges are hardened.

In mediaeval Europe, hardened edges were sometimes welded on a soft core. As far as I know, this technique was used in China only for broad swords. Chinese straight swords traditionally had a three-layer pattern called Sān Méi. The blade was made of three layers of steel welded together: a thin central one of hardened steel forming the edges, and two layers of softer steel or iron protecting the former from being shattered by strong blows and providing the blade with an elastic structure.

Balance and dynamic properties

A sword's balance is traditionally expressed by the location of its centre of gravity (COG) also known as the centre of inertia. For a

Jiàn, the COG is usually located about 10 to 20 cm in front of the guard, as measured from the forward end of the handle.

But I think that there is usually too much emphasis on the COG location. Although the COG does play an important role in sword handling it is far from being the main feature affecting sword's tractability. While the COG of an object describes its static balance and how it responds to the global application of a physical force independently of its actual shape, dynamic rotational properties also depend on mass distribution and shape. This is why a rod and a ball do not handle the same at all although both have their COG located at their geometric centre.

Dynamic rotational properties are thus even more essential and determine how the sword feels when wielded, how it moves, rotates and responds to the actions exerted on the handle. As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon to find swords with a COG located at the same distance from the handle but feeling completely different when wielded.

But measuring the physical property relating to sword rotational dynamics, the momentum of inertia, is not that easy, and even when it has been measured, interpreting this scientific value in terms of practical sword handling is far from being straightforward.

One way of accurately measuring the momentum of inertia of a sword is the pendulum test which consists in measuring its natural oscillation period around an axis located at a given distance of the COG. After a bit of maths, you end up with a figure that will not tell you much without any reference, to be honest. More research is definitely needed here.

A much easier way to examine the dynamic properties of a sword is the waggle test. Although it is much less accurate, it has the advantage of providing some indication on how these properties actually relate to how the sword will react to your actions on the handle.

To perform this test, hold the sword lightly by the handle between your thumb and forefinger, and then wave it smoothly sideways. You will notice a point somewhere in the blade that does not move: this is the pivot point relative to the place of the handle where you were holding the sword (see figure 1.3).

Changing the position of the fingers on the handle will move the pivot point to another location. When wielding a sword, it is thus

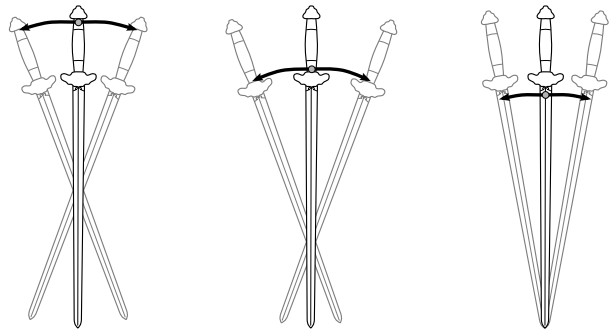

Fig. 1.3 – A pivot point is the natural centre of rotation of the sword relative to the place and direction of an action applied to the handle. If the sword is held near the pommel and waved sideways, the pivot point is close to the centre of the blade (left). Holding the sword close to the guard will move the pivot point further down the blade towards the tip (middle). To place the pivot point at the tip of the blade for this sword, a lateral action must be applied about an inch in front of the guard (right). Although this may seem an inconvenience, a proper adjustment of the grip and a slanted action on the handle nonetheless allows the control of this point. Furthermore, this may also help to keep the blade tip in line when thrusting while controlling the opponent's blade with the guard.

possible to control the location of the sword's centre of rotation by adjusting the place and direction of the action applied by the grip on the handle.

The pivot points relative to the hilt, are usually located within the first half of the sword's length starting from the tip. Their location is determined by the mass distribution along the sword and in particular by the relative masses on each side of the grip. Factors affecting this distribution in an unmounted blade are the form and dimensions of its cross section, how it tapers and becomes thinner towards the point, and its proportion to the tang. Adding a pommel to an unmounted blade, even a relatively light one, will dramatically modify the sword's dynamic properties, not only bringing the COG towards the hilt, but also displacing the pivot points towards the tip. However, too heavy a pommel would result in pivot points located too far forward, possibly even beyond the tip. On the contrary, too light a pommel would make it difficult or even impossible to obtain a pivot point at the tip of the blade. Achieving an appropriate range of pivot points enabling a proper

control of the sword thus results from a precise blade shape design and an accurate adjustment of the blade and pommel respective weights.

The interested reader will find more information on the subject in the book *Das Schwert – Gestalt und Gedanke/The Sword – Form and Thought* published by the *Deutches Klingen Museum* in Solingen. Although it presents exclusively western swords from different periods, this book provides a wealth of information about sword balance and dynamics equally applicable to Chinese swords.

Choosing a Tàijíjiàn sword

There is a large variety of practice swords available on the market for Tàijíjiàn and choosing one is usually much a matter of personal preference and budget. Most of these swords, however, are only distantly related to the real weapons that were still in practical use when traditional Tàijíjiàn forms were created. Many of them have a very poor balance and are either too light or too heavy. Whereas the actual weight of a practice sword is not that important and should be adapted to the practitioner's fitness and experience, the sword's balance and dynamic behaviour is crucial and should never be overlooked. Security in two-person drills and free play are also an absolute priority.

Practitioners with a strong interest in all dimensions of Tàijíjiàn will most certainly end up possessing at least two swords, one for form practice and the other one for partner drills and free play.

Form practice

As traditional form movements were adapted to the balance of historical swords, wielding such a weapon, even a quite heavy one, should have been effortless when performing the form if the Tàijí principles were respected.

Nowadays, practising the form with a sword having dimensions, weight and balance similar to those of historical ones can only bring us closer to the essence of traditional sets. Handling such a sword may well be much more demanding than using a lightweight blade, it is nonetheless an incomparable and challenging opportunity to make progress on our way towards a deeper understanding of our

art and a better embodiment of the Tàijí principles.

However, while it is true that a heavier sword may be a better guide for form practice than a lighter one, it is also much less forgiving of technical mistakes and excess of muscular tension. The weight of the sword should thus be adapted to the practitioner's experience and fitness. There is no point for a beginner to practise with a heavy sword that would do nothing but strain his joints and muscles at every clumsy move he would make. Thus, practising with a wooden or cheap light steel sword will be acceptable for an absolute beginner to memorize the form, but will soon become limiting when it comes to more in-depth practice. Once he has gained sufficient experience, it is advisable for the practitioner to change for a well-balanced sword weighing approximately a historically accurate 700 to 900 g.

Similarly, beginners learning the form and basics may be unnecessarily hampered by a long blade and should favour shorter ones. More experienced practitioners though, if their grip is truly relaxed, should be able to easily accommodate a longer blade provided it is not extremely long. A popular rule of thumb to determine the right length for the blade consists in holding the sword vertically along your left arm, like at the overture of the form. The tip of the blade should reach the height of your ear. Basically, this is equivalent to making sure that the blade is longer on average than the length of the arm of most opponents. They would thus not be able to protect themselves from a thrust by blocking it at the guard. In any case, a blade from 70 to 75 cm long should be convenient for most people.

Whether the sword should have a tassel or not depends on the style. Some use a tassel, others, like the Yángjiā Mìchuán, do not. Much has been said about the role of the tassel. It is widely accepted that, during form performance, the way the tassel is moving provides an indication of the practitioner's quality of movement. I am willing to accept the argument, as the tassel may be a pedagogical tool to balance the intention between the sword tip and the hilt. But if too much attention is paid to the tassel, the practitioner may well end up performing a tassel form. I am much less convinced by some other explanations such as the use of the tassel to distract the opponent. I personally prefer to threaten the opponent with the blade, which is much more distracting and,

contrary to the tassel, is sharp and cannot be grabbed.

Actually, if we refer to historical representations of swords and swordsmen, it seems that the tassel is a rather late invention. My guess is that it was a decorative evolution of the lanyards that can be seen on earlier pictures and were used to secure the sword in the hand when fighting. In any case, as I do not use a tassel, my only advice about it is to do whatever is recommended by the style you practise.

Two-person drills and martial applications

Simple safely structured partner drills such as sticky swords, guiding and following, etc. might be practised with same sword as you practise the form with, as long as no attack is aimed at the face or the upper body.

I nonetheless recommend to restrict unprotected drills to well-trained experienced practitioners who are used to practise together. In all other occasions, the use of specially designed swords and appropriate protective gear – a fencing mask and gloves at the very least – is a necessity to limit as much as possible the risks of accident.

Steel rigid blunt swords with a leather-covered tip are a good and relatively cheap compromise if you are on a budget. However, it should be remembered that those swords were not designed for this purpose, and they may be dangerous without the appropriate protections and precautions. Accidents may happen, and whoever uses such swords for partner work does it at their own risks. Note that I do not recommend to blunt a so-called flexible blade as they are not only unsuitable for partner work, they are also usually so thin that they are nearly sharp.

Contrary to what is often thought, wooden swords are not really safer since, due to their stiffness, they cannot curve to absorb effectively the shock of a thrust. Furthermore, the thickness of wooden blades hinders the feeling of blade contact which might be a problem for some kind of exercises.

The best option is definitely to use swords specifically designed for sparring. Their thick rounded edges and rolled tip will make them pretty safe provided you are wearing at least a fencing mask and padded gloves. A padded jacket may provide extra protection for more drill intensity. In addition, since they weigh over 800

g, they are less forgiving of mistakes than lighter swords when it comes to performing techniques in compliance with principles, which is an asset for technical applications and drills.

Free play

Though gentle soft games can be played with unprotected blade or blunt steel swords with a leather-covered tip, I strongly recommend to always use specifically designed swords associated to appropriate protective gear (fencing mask, padded gloves and padded fencing jacket). Even if attacks are voluntarily restricted to the lower body, instinctive reactions may cause accidents with dramatic consequences without the appropriate equipment and precautions.

Wooden swords are not more suitable for free play than they are for partner drills. Uncontrolled vigorous cuts hitting fingers or bones are not less painful nor dangerous than with a steel sword. Contrary to steel blades, wooden swords will not bend on thrusts and all the energy of the shock will be transmitted to the target instead of being partly dissipated by the blade.

A good sword for free play should have a rounded or rolled tip and thick rounded edges for safer thrusts and cuts. It should be heavy enough to enforce correct techniques and prevent unrealistic quick wrist movements similar to those seen in western modern fencing with the foil. However, its balance should allow all the techniques found in your Tàijíjiàn forms to feel natural with swift and easy transformation.

There are now Chinese steel swords designed for sparring and partner drills available on the market. My favourite model, and the one we use in our group, is produced by *Péter Regenyei Armory*. This sparring Jiàn is the result of a collaboration between Mattias Nyrell, the main Jiànfǎ instructor of *Historisk Fäktning i Linköping*, the renowned swordsmith Péter Regenyei and Peter Dekker, an antiquarian founder of *Mandarin Mansion* specialized in antique arms and armours from China and other regions of Asia.

This sword's design was based on a historical Tuánliàn jiàn belonging to Peter Dekker's personal collection. Those modest practical swords are also known as *militia swords* since they were most certainly made for use by rural militia to defend their goods and homes. The Regenyei sparring Jiàn design thus contrasts dramatically with the usual gilded and affected style of most Chinese

swords on the market. However, in its simplicity, this sword does reflect the artisanal beauty and quality of its fabrication.

The 73 cm long gently tapering blade has a rolled tip, flattened diamond-shaped cross section and thick rounded edges of approximately 1 to 2 mm. Those thick edges and rolled tip ensure a good dissipation of the energy when landing cuts or thrusts on protective gear. This should not be regarded though as an incentive to cut or thrust with full strength. While this blade has some degree of flexibility indeed, it nonetheless is pretty stiff and it might be a good idea to wear a chest protector, especially for women, and a throat protector in addition to the regular padded jacket.

Despite an actual weight between 800 and 900 g, this sword feels pretty light in the hand, with a very homogenous sensation from tip to pommel. The only thing that may require to get used to is the somewhat squarish handle, but this might be an asset after all for free play as it makes it easier to feel the blade alignment when wearing padded gloves.

Its excellent balance makes a swift and nimble sword that is very easy to control provided you are properly connected and you are moving it with your body and not from your wrist or your arm only. All moves and transformations feel natural and lively, either while performing the Yángjiā Mìchuán Kūnlún sword or when sparring.

I can only recommend the Tàijíjiàn enthusiast to invest in this sword. As a matter of fact, should you own only one sword, this is the one: it is indeed perfect not only for sparring and partner work but also for form practice.

Chapter 2

Tàijíjiàn practice

Tàijíjiàn is the pinyin transcription for the Chinese word designating the art of the sword based on the Tàijí principles – also known as the Tàijí (or Taichi) sword – and studied together with Tàijíquán, the Tàijí boxing.

In most styles, Tàijíjiàn practice consists essentially, if not exclusively, in learning and performing a sword form. As such, it complements bare hand practice and provides the practitioners with an invaluable tool to improve their skills. The sword is indeed a devoted partner, always ready to guide us on the way towards a better understanding and embodiment of the Tàijí principles.

However, I am convinced that, in this respect, Tàijí sword practice can only benefit from the thorough study of basic techniques, fencing notions, partner drills, martial applications and even free play.

In the XXIst century, Tàijí fencing does not have to be practical any more: fighting skills and efficiency are not sought for themselves, but their purpose is nothing but the application of the Tàijí principles in action. From basic techniques to free fencing, the practitioners will strive to achieve unity with their sword, improve their nimbleness and sensitivity, relax their body and mind, develop their Yì, etc.

Last but not least, this life-long endeavour should also bring its share of fun.

Basic exercises and warm-up

The goal of warm-up and basic exercises is the preparation of the body and the mind to the safe performance of efficient techniques conforming to the Tàijí principles.

Warm-up should gently mobilise the joints and muscles to bring them to their optimal functioning level for smoother movements and lower risks of strains. An emphasis on the upper body is necessary, in particular the shoulders, arms, wrists and fingers, which do most of the job of sustaining the sword. But the lower body should not be overlooked in preparation to the footwork which is of crucial importance in fencing.

I usually tend to start the warm-up by mobilising the pelvis and the spine, which are at the core of every movement in Tàijí, and then continue with the shoulders, elbows, fingers and wrists. For the lower body, I start with the ankles, carry on with the knees and then the hips, exercising balance at the same time. Eventually, the session ends with codified and free footwork.

Before proceeding to basic techniques, it might be a good idea to finish the warm-up session using the sword as an accessory. This will not only serve to further stretch the wrists and shoulders, it will also help the practitioners to exercise their relationship with the sword. The repetition of a simple non-technical movement helps indeed to install the relationship between the sword and the body: the sword's energy, absorbed and concentrated in the body, is returned to the sword for the next movement[1].

Repetition is of crucial importance as well for practising basic techniques, the emblematic basic cuts and thrusts. Repeating them in series is essential to technical precision and body control, requisite conditions for the proper realisation of techniques in less controlled situations.

It is interesting as well to practise the basic techniques with targets, not only to exercise precision, but also to develop the mindset and relaxation of the body appropriate for an effortless efficiency of techniques. For thrusts, Cì or Zhā, cloth-pegs hung on a string at throat level make pretty convenient targets. Targets for cutting techniques are more difficult to set up: cuts are supposed to pass through the target, hence hard resisting targets are out of question.

[1] See chapter 3 for more details on handling the sword.

Non ligneous plant stalks or a slab of clay can make appropriate cheap targets for test cutting without requiring a dangerously sharp blade. Clay works quite nicely with a regular blunt sword, but do not use your favourite one or be prepared for intensive cleaning of your sword after the session. Make sure as well that clay does not get soiled with pebbles or sand to avoid damaging the blade.

Those exercises build up the basics which in combination constitute the source of all the techniques that can be practised in the more diverse context of the form.

Form practice

The form is a set of movements arranged in a continuous succession of techniques which some practitioners present as a mock fight with an imaginary opponent.

However, I personally think that this is not the complete story: although the movements of the form are martial techniques indeed, the whole set does not constitute a single combat from start to end. Techniques are rather arranged in short series, which the European tradition calls 'pieces', describing a variety of situations where these techniques may be applied. Variations are given throughout the form and as most movements may have several applications, series may overlap or describe varying situations.

The form is much more than a catalogue of techniques, it is the source from which all applications proceed according to the infinity of possible situations. As an actualisation of the Yīn/Yáng principle issuing from the Tàijí, the Tàijíjiàn form contains all the potentialities for the generation of countless applications. Performing the form is thus generating a potential for infinite creativity, reserving the practical expression of techniques for their application in real situations.

In my opinion, the form is therefore essentially a tool for achieving a better understanding and embodiment of the Tàijí principles. Memorisation is only a beginning: what is truly trained when practising the form is Yīn/Yáng transformation and directing the Yì as a continuous yet ever-changing flow. Gradually, with practice, unity with the sword can be achieved, the form becomes more and more internal, gains in fluidity, feels easy and natural. Until ultimately, I like to think that the body and the mind are delivered

from all their tensions, and nothing remains but pure Yì effortlessly generating the form.

The form, however, is not only a mental exercise but it also physically trains the body. Some movements have indeed an exaggerated amplitude to develop strength, balance and flexibility. Others are clearly intended to be spectacular and demonstrative. Every Tàijíjiàn form is thus made of a mixture of internal martial training, gymnastic exercise, and spectacle. Discerning how these characteristics are actually expressed in the different movements allows the practitioner to favour at will one aspect or the other.

To those interested in improving their fencing skills, the form provides an invaluable tool for building a strong repertoire and knowledge of martial techniques while practising the body mechanics appropriate for their effective application.

The form, however, is not strictly representative of the occurrence of techniques in free fencing, where the most frequent and effective ones are rather simple. The form contains surprisingly complex movements that may contribute to its demonstrative character, but probably also prepare the practitioner to master extreme techniques appropriate to exceptional circumstances. Most swordsmen of the time might well have never needed to put these techniques to practice, those who actually had to might have owed their life to this preparation instead of having been overwhelmed by a stunning situation.

In modern times, martial efficacy of Tàijí fencing is not a matter of survival any more, but, within the context of friendly controlled practice, aims more readily at freeing the mind and the body from their tensions. The martial interpretation of the form thus provides a whole range of situations where the practitioners may put their body and mind to the test in partner drills and martial applications.

Two-person drills and martial applications

Two-person drills are simplified and codified situations whose goal is to introduce and exercise important principles and notions of Tàijí fencing such as distance and time, the lines, sensing through the blade, footwork in response to the opponent's moves, nimbleness, etc. Entirely dedicated to this pedagogic goal, those drills are

essentially continuous exercises or games, most of the time without much concern for the realism of the situations.

Martial applications will then develop the same principles and notions within a codified or semi-codified simulated piece of fight, simultaneously giving examples of the potential practical use of techniques from the form. As such, they open the way to a better understanding of the form, highlighting the martial essence of movements and the distinction between practical and demonstrative moves.

Although martial applications may be much more realistic than two-person drills, it must be acknowledged that they none the less are simulations far from reproducing exactly all aspects of a true sword fight to death. Depending on their experience and protection level, practitioners may perform the applications at different speeds or may be more or less well-disposed towards their partner, thus achieving different levels of realism. Some applications may work well at low speed, with caring partners but not any more when performed faster, with partners who do not hold their attack. Performing applications with full protective gear which allows full blows may thus be more demanding and what used to be working with less protections and more precautions might not work as nicely. On the contrary, performing an application at low speed may allow a non-cooperative partner to counter-attack whereas such a riposte would have required light-fast reactions against a technique performed at full-speed.

Evaluating the true effectiveness of martial applications needs therefore to account for all those factors. For what is worth, as far as they allow us to develop and practise the Tàijí principles and fencing notions, the approximate realism of martial applications should give entire satisfaction for our purpose. The efficiency of an application should be only a consequence of our conformance to the principles, and definitely not a matter of speed or strength. Thus, martial application practice may help develop the proper mindset and body disposition for the effective application of techniques and principles in free play.

Free play

Free play refers to the wholly non-codified simulation of a sword fight. Depending on the protective gear worn by the practitioners and their experience, rules may be defined to guarantee their safety. In any case, violence is definitely ruled out and free play should always remain a friendly game, without any overly competitive mind.

I understand that some practitioners may feel concerned that free play might possibly not be considered as internal. Actually, expressing martial techniques should not be confused with external practice. My personal view is that we may speak of internal practice as long as every movement is born from the Yì which shapes the technique and, originating from the centre, is eventually expressed towards the periphery. Efficient techniques proceed naturally from the appropriate intention and a relaxed body, well mastered principles that have become natural and can thus be applied spontaneously. Students of internal arts should not cling too much to trifling technical details, which are only the finger of the wise man. They should reach for the moon: develop their capacity to apply the principles in challenging and unpredictable situations.[2] Everything else should follow.

Nimbleness of the Yì and of the body results from an open and free, tensionless mind allowing us to remain relaxed when facing the threats of an opponent. After all, this may be the true practical application of martial arts in our modern times: not to let ourselves overwhelmed by stress in all matters of urgency.

Of course, as already mentioned above, technique efficacy is entirely relative to the context: free play is – and must stay – no more than a simulation that cannot reproduce all aspects of a true sword fight, and in particular the psychological aspects.

In any case, nowadays, arguments are not settled any more in duels or sword fights and the purpose of Tàijí fencing is more a matter of personal development than of actual fighting capacities.

[2]To be honest, I do not even think there are that many differences between internal and external arts when it comes to high level practice. The main difference would rather lie in the way these arts are taught. External arts first focus on techniques and let the student figure out the principles whereas internal students are taught the principles and must figure out how to perform the techniques in conformance.

Our main concern is not to hit the opponent by all means but to do it with the appropriate manner while not being hit. How the goal is reached is more important than the goal itself: scoring a hit against an opponent should be the result of the proper application of the Tàijí principles to the current situation, and not a purpose in itself.

Thus, in order to avoid excessive competition, I prefer not to count hits and only appreciate subjectively the quality of the actions. Taking videos of free play sessions may also help reviewing actions afterwards to highlight the positive and the negative. With really nothing at stake, this less competitive approach allows to focus more on the principles and internal practice and limits the risks of accidents.

Safety considerations

The practice of Tàijí has been associated with health and personal development for perhaps over a century now. We could thus expect that preserving a good health should go along with the preservation of our physical integrity, and that Tàijíjiàn practice could be taken rather safely, from solo form to free play. Actually, even hard training of warriors in the past may have presented some degree of safety: what would have been the point of decimating the troops before actually sending them to battle.

Of course, accidents sometimes happen, but there is no reason why they should be the norm. We should in all circumstances bear in mind that even a blunt sword can be a deadly weapon and we should behave accordingly. Safe practice actually results from the combination of a responsible attitude with the appropriate equipment. The mind-set we adopt during any kind of practice is most important indeed. It is essential to me that we feel responsible not only for the physical integrity of other people around us when we hold or wield a sword, but also for our own safety. The first consequence of this state of mind is that, if it is adopted by all practitioners, everyone constantly maintains a good degree of watchfulness instead of solely relying on others for their safety. Furthermore, if we ever get hurt despite all precautions, this attitude also prevents us from systematically blame others for it.

It is also important to remember that solo practice is not ex-

empt from danger. Our concern for safety must not be limited to the practice ground but starts in the changing-room. As soon as we start holding or wielding a sword, we must do so most carefully. When carrying a sword, its blade should be held vertically along the arm or its tip should be pointing to the ground. Never ever wave a sword heedlessly and always make sure to be at safe distance from other people before starting to practise.

When it comes to partner drills, applications or free play, we should always adapt the speed and intensity of the practice to the less advanced partner and to the protective gear.

Both partners should use the same kind of equipment: a blunt sword[3] and a fencing mask are a minimum. Gloves and a padded jacket allow more dynamic practice and are highly recommended for free play.

If the above advices are followed, the risks of accident may be kept at a minimum. However, it should be always remembered that there is an inherent risk to any martial practice, that accidents can happen, and that when they do, the only thing we can do is to minimise as much as possible their consequences with the appropriate equipment and attitude. Those who partake in Tàijíjiàn fencing should acknowledge this idea and accept that they do so at their own risk.

[3]See chapter 1 for more details.

Part II

Elementary notions

Chapter 3

Sword handling

In Chinese culture, swordsmanship and calligraphy are considered as intimately related arts. It is commonly said indeed that a sword should be handled as if it were a calligraphy brush. This statement will be clear to everyone has tried one's hand at Chinese calligraphy: in order to achieve a proper control of the strokes, the brush must be held firmly yet not too tightly so as to be connected to the centre of the calligrapher's body. Any weakness or stiffness in the way the brush is handled will result in angular or wobbly strokes.

Similarly, when wielding a sword, a weak or stiff grip will hinder the fluidity of movements and the proper connection between the sword and the body, invariably resulting in clumsy and lifeless movements of the sword. In swordplay, an improper grip precludes sensing, adapting and reacting efficiently to the opponent's movements.

Since the way the hilt is gripped determines how tractable the sword is, an appropriate grip with the right alignment and a tensionless attitude are essential to achieve a good unity with the sword.

The sword grip

Of all the types of grips I experimented, I strongly recommend the one shown in figure 3.1(a) for both routine practice and swordplay.

To take this grip, align your tiger's mouth, wrist and forearm with the blade then wrap your fingers around the middle part of

the handle, between the two ferrules. The thumb, middle and ring finger lock the grip at the very centre of the handle. Both the index and little fingers remain free and participate to the precise control of the hilt position in the hand or allow loosening or tightening the grip.

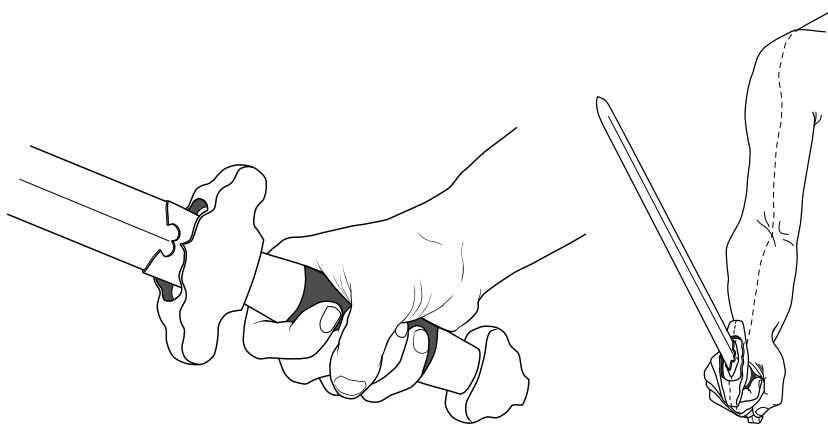

Fig. 3.1 – The sword grip: (a) the fingers are wrapped around the medium part of the handle with the thumb overlapping the middle and ring finger; (b) the wrist, elbow and shoulder joints are aligned with the blade as is represented by the dashed line.

As shown in figure 3.1(b), the wrist, elbow and shoulder are aligned in the plane of the blade. This ensures that the sword is firmly rooted in the hand and that a good connection is achieved between the centres of the sword and the body, a prerequisite for efficient absorption and expression without tension nor strain on joints, muscles and sinews. Furthermore, in this position, the elbow lies within the protective range of the guard and thus is less exposed to quick blows.

Occasionally, the grip may be adjusted to perform a particular technique, but when doing so, it is most important that much attention is paid not to heedlessly weaken nor stiffen the grip. In any case, when the circumstances are not favourable for changing grip, which is often the case in free sparring, it is highly recommended to keep on with the main grip described above.

The sword mobility is also controlled by tightening or loosening

the grip. It should be reminded though that no finger should ever fully release the handle: even when whirling the sword, all fingers should always maintain some control on the handle.

I am convinced that it is crucial to refrain from holding the handle next to the guard, even if the sword would feel less heavy this way because of the grip being closer to the sword's centre of gravity.

First of all, when the hand is at the centre of the hilt, the spindle-shaped handle fits the palm nicely and, as the guard and pommel are further away from the hand, they do not hinder sword movements.

Furthermore, Chinese guards being very narrow they do not wrap fully around the hand as the rapier's shell does and do not provide as much protection to the hand. However, if the grip is centred on the handle, the thumb and the forefinger are further away from the opponent's edge when controlling his blade and thus, are less exposed to accidental cuts than they would be with the hand next to the guard.

Finally, on a well-balanced sword, the centre of rotation resulting from a centred grip is precisely at the right location to enable the pommel to fully play its role in the sword dynamic balance[1], ensuring swift and lively sword movements that can really make a difference in swordplay.

The sword fingers

The hand posture known as the *sword fingers* or *sword talisman* is definitely emblematic of Chinese straight sword practice and particularly of Tàijíjiàn. In its traditional version shown in figure 3.2, the index and medium fingers are extended while the thumb, the ring and little fingers are connected to form a circle. Some practitioners also use a more relaxed version where the thumb, the ring and little fingers are simply relaxed without assuming the form of a closed circle.

The main role of the sword fingers is to create a spiral connecting the tip of the middle finger to the point of the blade and balancing the weight and movements of the sword. This spiral is

[1] See chapter 1 for more details on sword balance.

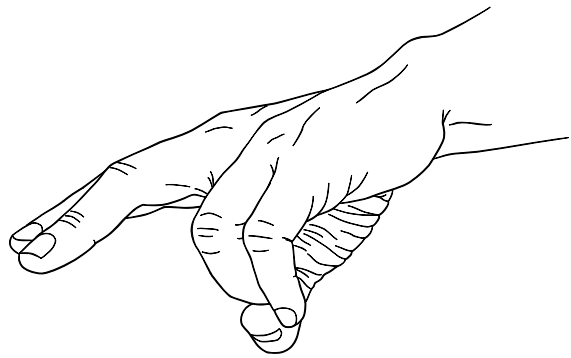

Fig. 3.2 – The sword fingers

generated by stretching the left arm forward in a direction parallel to the line that passes through both tips of the extended fingers.

Although the spiral is effective with both the traditional and relaxed forms, the more constrained traditional one draws the attention more readily to the left side than does the relaxed version.

When beginners hold a sword, their mind is strongly focussed on the sword and their right hand. Very often, the other side of the body is left completely unattended unless they pay great attention to maintaining a proper sword fingers hand shape. It is therefore important that beginners do not overlook the sword fingers. It is only when they have gained sufficient experience and the balancing spiral has become natural that they may start using the relaxed form.

Wielding the sword

It is often repeated that the sword should be an extension of the body and that the practitioners should make one with their sword. Although this may seem quite clear, it is far from being evident in practice. First of all, the sword should be considered as an extra segment of the arm with the grip playing the role of an additional joint. Like any other joint, the grip should therefore be relaxed and moving in unison with the whole body, allowing the sword to move freely in the hand.

If unity with the sword is purposed indeed, the sword nonetheless has its own individuality and its own particular way of respond-

ing to the practitioner's movements that depends on its physical characteristics. It is therefore indispensable that the sword's individual demeanour should be acknowledged in order to blend harmoniously its movements with those of the practitioner.

This is somehow similar to dancing: a good dancer does not merely impose steps on his partner but is constantly aware of her position and thus is able to adapt to her moves and gently lead her to take the appropriate steps for the next figure. The same stands when wielding a sword. Movements should not be imposed on the sword but the sword should be guided towards the appropriate direction to achieve the desired technique. In return, the practitioner's movements and steps are guided by the sword's weight and impetus: if the sword is an extension of the body indeed, the body is nonetheless an extension of the sword...

There is a constant two-way exchange between the sword and the practitioner that is most apparent in routine practice but is no less important in free play. Thus, even a rather heavy sword may be wielded effectively and swiftly with only a minimum of physical strength involved, the momentum of each movement being recovered and recycled into the next one.

The energy required to perform the techniques is provided by the weight and momentum of the sword itself combined with the right impulse from the body at the appropriate time. Thanks to inertia, the sword's centre of gravity, borne along by the sword's momentum, acts as a fulcrum to allow increasing the speed of the tip or pointing it to another direction. In free play, pressures exerted voluntarily or not by the opponent on the blade may also be absorbed, assimilated and transformed to generate attacks and ripostes.

To make a long story short we will conclude by saying that the energy is rooted in the hilt, controlled by the sword's centre and expressed in the blade.

Chapter 4

The Jìběn Jiànfǎ

The term Jìběn Jiànfǎ (基本劍法) denotes what is generally referred to as the sword basic techniques or basic cuts. It may be translated literally as: the *basic*, *elementary*, *fundamental* (Jìběn) *methods* (Fǎ), of the *straight sword* (Jiàn).

The different styles of Tàijíjiàn report a variable number of Jìběn Jiànfǎ, usually ranging from four to thirteen or more. The names of several of them are mentioned already in the Jiàn Jīng, a sword treatise written by Yú Dàyóu around 1560, or in the Wǔbèi Zhì, a military encyclopaedia presumably published in 1620. It is not clear though whether these terms were already referring to the very same techniques as they do today in Tàijíjiàn, and even more so as the Jìběn Jiànfǎ names are not always consistent across styles.

The Yángjiā Mìchuán Tàijíjiàn tradition lists eight Jìběn Jiànfǎ, each corresponding to one of the eight sections in the Kūnlún sword form: Pī, Cì, Liāo, Zhā, Mò, Duò, Tiǎo, Huà. A ninth one, Diǎn, is also referred to, but is sometimes described as a combination of Pī and Cì, possibly in order to preserve the fit total number of eight pure techniques. Whatever the reason for it, I have the feeling that this description of Diǎn as a combination actually acknowledges that the Jìběn Jiànfǎ can be mixed together. I therefore like to consider them not as techniques *per se* but rather as technical principles that, blended together, make up the actual sword techniques. The so-called basic techniques would thus be simply the techniques which are representative of the Jìběn Jiànfǎ constituting their main, yet not exclusive, component.

A close look at the Chinese characters for the eight Jiànfǎ of the Yángjiā Mìchuán reveals that four of them (Pī 劈, Cì 刺, Duò 剁 and Huà 劃) contain the graphic key for the knife, whereas the others (Liāo 撩, Zhā 扎, Mò 抹, Tiǎo 挑) contain the key for the hand. We may thus argue that the first four focus on how the blade is actually used for cutting or thrusting while the others rather describe the general movement (raising, whipping, etc.) independently of the weapon. As a matter of fact, the Liāo and Zhā characters can be found in the names of spear, staff or even boxing techniques mentioned in various historical martial arts manuals. The ninth technique, Diǎn 點, whose name means *pointing*, is once again an outsider: as its character does not contain the hand or the knife keys, it would exclusively refer to the point of the blade.

The descriptions of the Yángjiā Mìchuán Tàijíjiàn Jìběn Jiànfǎ will not be presented hereafter in their traditional order, which follows the sequence of the corresponding sections in the Kūnlún sword form. Instead, I will present first the four blade techniques before proceeding to the other ones. They are personal interpretations allowing for the above points of view and based upon Master Wang's teachings and historical texts. Although the contents of this chapter essentially apply to the Yángjiā Mìchuán tradition, it is expected that they may none the less apply more generally, at least in part, to other styles as well.

Pī

In Chinese, Pī 劈 means *to split*, *to cut* but also *to hit*, *to go straight to*. In essence, Pī is a splitting cut that goes straight through the target.

As a basic technique, Pī is simply described as a downward vertical splitting cut. It is often associated with an outside or inside whirl of the sword, which I will not describe here in detail as it is actually not part of the Pī technique and will be more appropriately explained elsewhere.

Although the formal Pī technique is a downward cut, I personally think that the Pī splitting energy can be oriented in any direction. Thus, even horizontal or upward cuts which characteristically split the target open without any slicing movement may somehow be considered akin to this energy.

The formal emblematic Pī technique is prepared by raising the sword handle up to ear level while sinking into the leg opposite to the armed hand. The grip should be relaxed yet firmly secured between the middle fingers and the thumb. The other fingers maintain a relaxed contact with the handle allowing some flexibility in the grip while at the same time keeping control of the blade. In a less formal, less static context, this preparation would be combined with footwork while parrying or evading an attack, seamlessly transforming the defensive action into the riposte.

During the first phase of the cut, the hand is thrown downwards along a diagonal, drawing the sword forwards and downwards in the direction of the pommel to accelerate the blade. The slanted force the hand exerts on the handle, combined with the action of the last two fingers tightening their grip, makes the sword to gradually rotate around its centre of gravity (fig. 4.1 a).

This movement draws its energy from the expansion of the body, which may be seconded by a forward step for increased reach and cutting power.

Then, once the hand has been overtaken by the sword's centre of gravity (fig. 4.1 b), it stops exerting an action and simply follows the handle, while keeping a relaxed yet firm control of the sword's trajectory. Thus, the blade is moving freely when it reaches the target with an unperturbed trajectory, and all the kinetic energy accumulated during the acceleration phase is fully transferred into the cut (fig. 4.1 c).

It is absolutely crucial that the flat is perfectly aligned with the blade trajectory to make sure that the weight of the blade lies behind the edge to push it through the target. If the blade hits the target at an angle, no matter how small, it tends to rotate on its axis and may bounce back dangerously instead of nicely cutting through the target. On the other hand, when the alignment is correct and the grip is relaxed, the blade will flash through the target without any appreciable feedback.

After the cut, the handle naturally presses against the heel of the hand and all the fingers tighten their grip to bring the sword to a halt at waist level in a protective position without any tension nor bounce. Thanks to a proper body alignment, the sword's energy is thus returned to the body, helping to recentre oneself and make ready for the next technique.

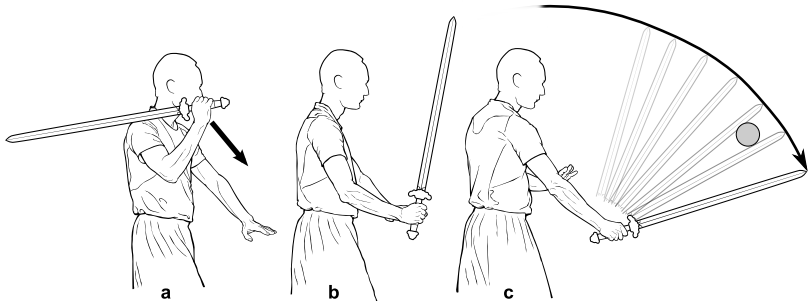

Fig. 4.1 – Pī cut: (a) Starting from a high position of the sword, the right hand draws the sword handle downwards to accelerate the blade; (b) shows the end of the acceleration phase, from now on, the hand will not exert any more action on the handle; (c) the hand follows the handle with only a firm control of the sword's trajectory so that the blade is allowed to move freely though the target represented here by a grey circle. Note that the trajectory of the blade tip is not circular but an elongated arc.

Huà

The verb Huà 劃 means *to delimit*, *to draw*. The same character is also used as a variant of the word for an individual stroke in a Chinese character. Along with the fact that the left part of this character is indeed the key for the brush, these observations tend to suggest that the technique somehow evokes the notion of calligraphy, of writing or drawing.

The emblematic technique is presented in the Yángjiā Mìchuán as a horizontal cut or a large horizontal movement for keeping opponents away. The idea is here to sweep space with the sword to delimit the largest possible area around oneself and slash anyone closing in.

In a more general perspective, Huà cuts do not need to always be horizontal and encompass a whole range of distances, from very long slashing cuts with the very tip of the blade, to very close-range drawing cuts with the whole edge. In any case, all Huà cuts have in common to be long-energy slicing movements where the blade actually draws a groove in the target instead of splitting it open at once like the short-energy Pī cut does.

When performing a long-range Huà, the sword is thrown forwards and, when the arm has nearly reached its full extension,

slightly before the blade hits the target, the grip is gently tightened to secure the connection between the centres of the sword and the body. The rotation thus continues around the shoulder while the sword is pulling the body forwards until maximal reach is achieved (fig. 4.2 a-c). Then, the grip acting as a fulcrum, the sword's inertia pushes back the handle against the heel of the hand. This results in a slicing cut and a backward movement that centres the body back into a guard stance (fig. 4.2 d-f).

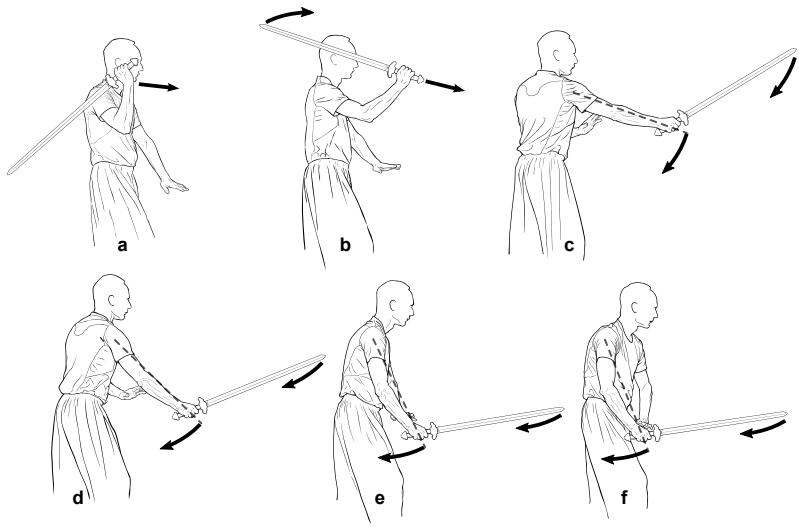

Fig. 4.2 – Long-range Huà cut: (a) Starting from a high position of the sword, (b) the right hand throws the pommel forwards; (c) shows the end of the active phase of the technique; (d) to (f) during the passive phase, the sword's inertia pushes the hand backwards, performing the slicing cut and centring the body back into position.

At closer range the dynamics of the Huà cut rely less on sword's inertia but more on body structure and movement. Once the edge of the blade is in contact with the target, the slicing cut is generated by pressing the edge against the target while pulling it in a direction parallel to the blade, either with a step or a rotation of the body. On some occasions, in particular when one is passing behind the opponent's back, it may be possible to perform a short range Huà with the false edge.

Beside being a slicing cut, Huà can also be used to keep the

opponents at distance or to incite them to react so we may exploit their action and take control of the rhythm. This is achieved either performing an uncommitted long-range Huà or whirling the sword while advancing. This should definitely be done at a distance close enough to be perceived clearly as a threat even though we may be out of measure when doing so. The ideal distance is actually the very upper limit of the short measure, at which distance, a hit being uncertain yet perfectly plausible, the opponent will feel compelled to react defensively. It is crucial here to get ready to follow up with a more committed attack or with a blade control depending on the opponent's reaction. This second intention will thus ensure to keep the initiative and exploit the opponent's action.

While withdrawing after an unsuccessful attack, we may want to keep our opponent away with a series whirling cuts performed in a row, which Master Wang Yennien described as being Huà cuts as well. This application of the technique perfectly fits the translation *to delimit* as it creates indeed a zone of security and prevents the opponent from catching up and attacking us while we are getting out of measure.

Cì

The word Cì 刺, which means *to thrust*, *to pierce*, *to stab*, is used in the Wǔbèi Zhì as a generic term referring to all thrusting techniques. It is mentioned as well in other ancient treatises to describe thrusts with a variety of weapons.

In the Yángjiā Mìchuán tradition, Cì can be defined as a powerful upward or horizontal thrust where the point is pushed forcefully through the target.

The formal technique is habitually performed starting on the right foot, left leg forward, either with a passing step (long Cì) or with a simple transfer of the weight onto the left foot (short Cì). In the formal context of drills and routine practice, the short Cì is aimed at the belly and the long one at the throat. When sparring though, other parts of the body, such as the torso or even the face, are also targeted.

Long or short, the technique invariably starts by creating in the body a spiral structure connecting the left foot to the sword. As soon as the waist starts moving, the right arm pushes on the

handle and rises in a spiralling movement that ends up with a flat horizontal sword position, the pommel oriented towards the left hip. Simultaneously, the weight is transferred onto the left foot. The grip gradually adapts to achieve a uninterrupted connection between the hand and the handle, without any kink, suitable for pushing the sword forwards effortlessly. The adjustment of the grip also permits the exertion on the handle of an oblique action reaching through the guard for a point just beyond to generate at the tip a pivot point that stabilizes it[1].

In the long version of the technique, a greater reach is achieved thanks to a passing step of the right foot. The right arm must be extended before stepping forward in order to improve the precision of the thrust and to keep the body as far as possible from danger behind the sword. Further protection can also be achieved by binding the opponent's blade to control it with the guard or the forte.

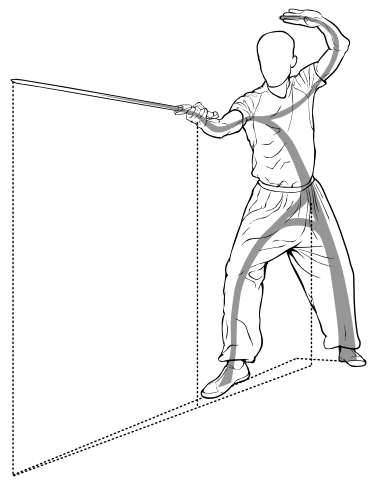

Fig. 4.3 – At the end of the long Cì thrust, the sword is aligned with the left hip but its point is centred, aiming at the base of the throat. The power of the whole body structure is concentrated into the sword to forcefully push the tip through the target.

Ideally, the right heel should touch the ground exactly at the same time as the blade tip reaches the target. The relaxation of the structure then completes the passing step while pushing the

[1] See chapter 1 for more details on pivot points.

blade through. While doing so, it is important not to fall into the right leg to keep our ability to withdraw quickly if needed. This does not mean though that the weight should not be in any way transferred onto the right leg, but that the polarity empty/full between the two legs should be maintained under all circumstances so as to avoid double weight. A powerful yet mobile structure is thus achieved by the generation of an arc of force, going from the left foot, traversing the back, spiralling along the right arm to reach the tip of the blade, and backed up by the spiral in the left arm and sword fingers.

Besides the above emblematic form, the Cì techniques may encompass other powerful thrusts leveraging the body structure to push the sword forwards in a, clockwise or anticlockwise, spiral. In all those techniques, a protective cone is created, whose point aims at the target and within which one can step in, safely hidden behind one's own sword.

Duò

The translation of Duò 剁, referring to the cooking term *to mince*, somehow suggests repetition and cutting using a part of the blade further away from the tip than Pī. The movement itself is a combination of a forward extension with some sort of shearing, as if using a large cooking knife to mince herbs or vegetables.

In the Yángjiā Mìchuán tradition, the emblematic Duò is performed with both arms extended almost in line with the sword's blade (fig. 4.4).

Even though both hands are in contact with the handle, this should not be mistaken for a true double handed grip of the sword. While raising the sword and advancing, the right hand holds the sword while the left hand provides the structure and power by acting on the pommel along the direction of the blade. Power originates in the weight transfer from the rear leg onto the fore leg, is transmitted to the sword by the left/rear hand with the right/fore hand exactly and passively balancing the forces to effortlessly generate the technique. This combination of the right hand's passive role with the left hand's action creates a polarity resulting in a movement of the sword perpendicular to the axis of the right arm. An effective connexion between the waist and the sword will thus

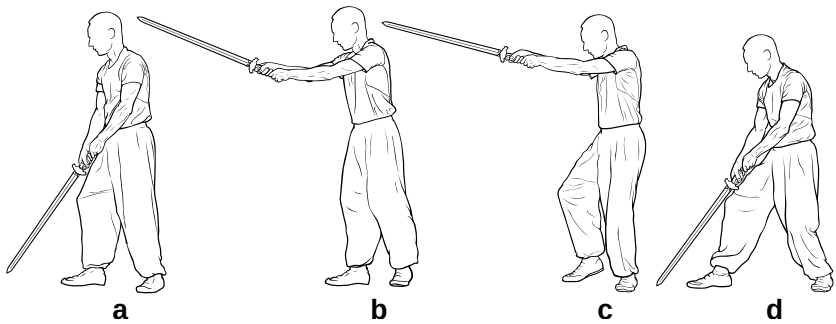

Fig. 4.4 – Duò in the forward direction. From a low guard (a), raise the sword with a transfer of the weight onto the right foot (b), invert polarity and transfer the weight back onto the left foot (c), drop the sword while sinking in the left leg and advancing the right foot.

allow the explosive expression of the Duò technique. This method somehow echoes the precepts found in the Jiàn Jīng stating that, when wielding a double-handed sword, power is first in the waist, then in the rear hand, and finally in the fore hand. When lowering the sword, the roles of both hands are inverted. For the retreating Duò, although the combination of forces is the same, the right hand is active when raising the sword, and passive otherwise (fig. 4.5). As a rule of thumb, advancing or retreating, the active hand is always the one on the same side as the foot that is moving.

Since, when cooking, herbs are usually minced by cutting downwards, we may argue that the active phase of Duò is the descending one. However, if we examine attentively the actual movement of a kitchen knife when mincing, we may discover that its form when cutting actually corresponds to the rising phase of Duò. The main difference is that the tip of the knife stays down in contact with the table whereas the point of the sword rises up. But, in both cases, the edge follows the same movement relative to the tip. However, it is perfectly possible to be active in both phases, the actual passive phase being the transition movement between the ascending and descending parts of the technique. Thus, Duò can be a raising thrust or cut as well as a descending cut, or, combined with Mò energy, an action on the opponent's blade, either ascending to intercept and deflect or descending to shear.

It is worth noting at this point that, since both hands are in contact with the hilt, the sword is always in line with the axis of

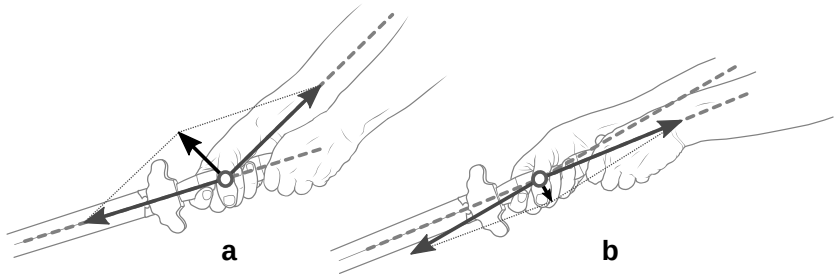

Fig. 4.5 – (a) To perform a forward rising Duò, the left hand pushes the handle in the direction of the blade tip while the right arm passively balances the pushing force. Due to the angle between the pushing direction and the right arm, the resulting force perpendicular to the right arm pushes the sword upwards. If stepping backwards, the same forces apply but the right hand is actively pulling the sword whereas the left hand passively balances this action.
(b) To perform a forward descending Duò, the right hand pushes the handle while the left arm passively balances this force. The resulting force perpendicular to the left arm, draws the sword downwards. In the backward version of the technique, the left hand pulls the sword while the right hand is passive.

the body. This axis is more to the left when we are on our left foot, in the low on-guard position that precedes the ascending forward phase of Duò. Then, during the lifting phase of the movement, the axis is shifting to the right before being transferred back to the left when descending. Therefore, in the deflect/shear application of Duò in combination with Mò, during the upward interception/deflection, transferring the weight onto the right/forward leg gently pushes the opponent's tip away, allowing the descending shear to naturally aim at the centre of the opponent's sword, deflecting it further to open the way for a hit while preventing any counter attack.

Although the classic movement is done with two hands, it is also possible to perform a Duò with one hand only. In this case, the heel of the hand plays the same role as the rear hand in the two-handed version while the first three fingers — the index and middle fingers, and the thumb — play the part of the forehand.

During the ascending phase, the handle of the sword is pushed forwards by the heel of the hand and simultaneously pulled by the first three fingers. Given a good structure in the on-guard position,

it is then possible, even with only one hand, to swiftly and effortlessly raise the sword from a low to a high position, for thrusting or engaging. The alignment of the sword is quite similar to the two-handed version, with the tip of the blade in line with the body axis. However, the structure is not as strong as in the two-handed Duò and, as a result, the shearing actions are not as powerful. However, this version of the movement is useful for quickly engaging the opponent's blade or a sudden attack from a lower guard.

Liāo

Translating as *to raise*, *to lift*, *to sprinkle*, Liāo 撩 is found in various ancient manuals for different weapons. The Yángjiā Mìchuán tradition describes the technique as an upward cut, but it is sometimes also considered as a defensive action used to parry or deflect an incoming attack. Technical details will vary according to the type of cut performed, splitting or drawing upward cut, or whether Liāo is used to parry. All variations though have in common the upward direction of the movement, as if raising a curtain, which may explain the fact that this character has the key for the hand instead of the knife.

In the Yángjiā Mìchuán tradition, Liāo cuts is usually presented in series of two consecutive cuts, one from left to right then one from right to left.

Zhā

Zhā 扎 is a downward thrust.

Mò

Mò 抹 encompasses all the techniques that take control of the centre of the opponent's blade.

Tiǎo

Tiǎo 挑 means to rise, to provoke something or someone, to poke the fire. It is a swift cut performed with the false edge.

Diǎn

Diǎn 點 is a swift thrust or light cut performed with the very tip of the blade.

Chapter 5

Footwork

This chapter will discuss the footwork in Tàijíjiàn.

Part III

Tàijíjiàn fencing

Chapter 6

Time and Distance

Like for any martial art, time and distance are most essential notions to fencing. It is only by mastering them that one may hope to become a truly proficient fencer.

Intricately intertwined, these two concepts are not absolute nor fixed notions though and bear all but no relation with actual physical dimensions. While they do help describing and objectively commenting fencing actions, they also encompass the sense of time and distance in a context of confrontation, that is to say the perception that the opponents have of their relative capacities of action. As such, time and distance are central to fencing tactics and strategy.

Fencing time

Fencing time is a unit of time defined as the duration of a simple action: a step, a cut, a thrust, a parry, etc. The number of time units taken by a combined action is the number of consecutive simple actions that compose it, simultaneous simple actions counting for one unit of time only. For example, one step while parrying followed by a riposte would sum up to two time units in all.

Fencing time is not related to actual clock time, it is not a definite span of time since the actual duration of a simple action will depend upon the speed at which it is executed. Fencing time is rather related to the notion of commitment in an action associated with an underlying intent. As long as the fencer is not fully engaged in his action, he may still transform and change his intent during

the same unit of time. It is only after full commitment that it becomes impossible to interrupt the course of the ongoing action and change one's mind during the same fencing time. This does not mean though that an action must necessarily be led to its term as soon as it has been initiated but that transformations take more time when the intention is fully engaged.

This very important tactical notion is used in feints and false attacks. As we shall see further, when feinting, full commitment is not sought but the fake strike must be convincing enough to compel the opponent to get fully involved in parrying what he thinks to be an attack. It is then possible to modify our initial action during the same time and launch the true attack while the opponent, sticking to his first reaction, is baffled. As a general rule, it should be avoided to engage in action too early so as to preserve for as long as possible a capacity to transform and adapt effectively to the opponent's reactions.

Fencing time may thus be seen as a useful theoretical notion for assessing the fencers' current ability for initiative, transformation or response during actions. It helps to formalise the course of simple actions when studying a *phrase d'arme*, no matter how fast or slow it is performed and assuming that both opponents are equally fast. Of course, in real life, some fencers are faster than others but actually, speed does not matter. Only tempo is important: what really counts is the right action at the right time. It is always possible to compensate for a lesser speed with the effective use of techniques and tactics, and above all, by mastering rhythm. A faster fencer may loose his advantage if he is forced by a proficient opponent to use more fencing times for his actions. This is sometimes adopted as a strategy by some fencers who keep their opponent in a constant state of urgency while allowing themselves to take their time. Whether they do so by maintaining a permanent threat against their opponent or by always stepping out of his lines of attack, they impose their own rhythm on the fight and do not allow their opponent to regain the initiative. To achieve this goal however, it is essential for them to stay connected to their opponent and that every single move and menace perfectly fits his reactions. In other words, the rhythm of the fight is actually a combination of the rhythms of both opponents. Although, the rhythm of one fencer may take precedence over the other's it never does so

independently: connection and relationship are essential.

The ability to grasp and match the rhythm of our opponent while concealing our own is therefore fundamental to seize the right moment and gain an advantage. It is essential to maintain a constant awareness of the opponent's moves and not to get trapped into heedless anticipation by misleading regular rhythm patterns. Great care should be paid too not to embrace too regular a rhythm that would consequently be easily predictable by the opponent. Controlling rhythm does imply a relaxed state of mind ensuring we are constantly ready to adapt to the situation and transform it to our advantage by responding to the opponent's moves unexpectedly. More than quick reactions though — haste should not be mistaken for speed — this is definitely a question of being on the edge of a perpetual present, letting the past flow away and the future happen without clinging to any premeditated technique.

Distance and measure

Just as fencing time does not actually represent an objective span of time, the effect of the distance between the two opponents on their respective ability to strike each other is more important here than their actual distance. We thus define measure as the distance range within which it is possible to hit the opponent in one fencing time. In other words, it is a distance close enough for not requiring more than one step to strike. If at least two steps are necessary, we are said to be out of measure.

On this basis, three in-measure distances may be defined:

1. *Guard distance* or *long measure*: one step is required for striking. This is the most usual distance in free play as it offers a good compromise between a protective attitude and a more pressing one.

2. *Reach distance* or *short measure*: at this distance, it is possible to strike with the appropriate section of the blade without having to step forward nor backward.

3. *Close distance*: this distance is too short to use the blade effectively, only close combat techniques can be used such as kicking, punching, grappling, etc.

But there is much more to measure than distance. Measure is influenced indeed by the fencers' stances and their respective angles of attack. The guard and foot position determine the range that can be covered by the sword during one fencing time with simple actions: step, weight transfer, arm and body rotation. Whether the target being aimed at actually lies or not within this range and may be reached in one time by an effective cut or thrust will in turn mainly depend upon the angle of attack and the opponent's cover.

It should be reminded that both the angle of attack and the sword's range must be considered here not only in the horizontal plane but in three dimensions, the longest distance being attained with the arm fully extended horizontally at shoulder level. Thus, in any situation, the closest targets are those approximately lying at shoulder's height, that is, most of the time, the upper chest and the throat. Lower targets may be reached by stepping forward but also by crouching or leaning so as to lower the shoulder down to target level.

Figure 6.1 shows how the sword's range is affected by the fencer's stance and stepping as well as by the height of the target.

Fencing being dynamic by nature, measure must be further accounted for in an ever changing context and may vary dramatically with every single move of the opponents. As stepping away from the target increases distance, one may be close enough to be statically in measure, but may be at the same time out of measure if evaluated dynamically. The combination of time and distance reduces or increases the relative duration of of fencing of fencing time units for each opponent depending on whether their steps bring them closer to or further from their target.

The concept of measure is not symmetrical indeed and the opponents are not necessarily within the same measure relatively to each other due to different stances, relative moves or respective angles of attack. A fencer may thus leverage the asymmetry of measure by stepping towards a direction and from an angle that would dynamically keep his opponent out of measure while simultaneously allowing himself to hit.

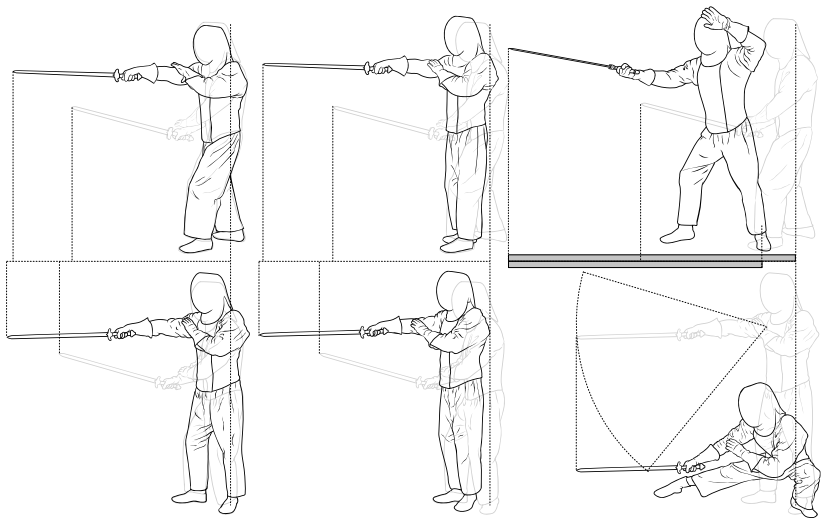

Fig. 6.1 – Some examples of stances and their thrusting range.
The leftmost column shows the distance reached by extending the arm from the initial guard position (drawn in grey). This distance is slightly longer with the right foot forward (bottom figure) because of the larger turning range of the body pushing the sword further. This can also be observed on the guard position which extends slightly further with the right foot in front. The same remark holds for the middle column showing the range attained by extending the arm and closing the step. This difference is smaller though because of the shorter distance between the feet.
The top right figure shows the maximum range that can be reached with a thrust. Thus, the upper grey box represents the length of the measure when starting with the left foot forward. Thanks to the shifting of the axis to the left foot and the subsequent passing step, this measure is longer than when starting directly with the right foot forward.
In the bottom right figure, the portion of circle represents the vertical range of the sword when standing up without stepping. Even though they may be at the same horizontal distance from the body axis, lower targets may none the less be out of reach unless crouching so as to bring the shoulder at their level.
All figures are drawn to scale.

This is actually a key to efficient Tàijí fencing: the opponent is overcome by the appropriate move at the appropriate time and distance, not by a greater speed. The principles are respected and the fencer's moves can thus be calm and his mind serene. It is therefore fundamental to develop an ability to instantly perceive one's own measure as well as the capacity of the opponent to hit so as to constantly adapt to the opponent's moves and strike him on the spot when it is possible to do so while keeping away from his threat.

Drills and exercises

The following drills and exercises will allow you to apprehend and practice the sense of distance and time.

Still target

This drill is adapted from the one called *tirer au mur* in western fencing. It consists in aiming thrusts or cuts at a non-moving target.

Take place in front of the target at a long-measure distance, draw a thrust or a cut at the target with one step.

Repeat this drill starting from various foot positions until you have a good grasp of the long measure in all stances.

Then, you may try yourself at the dynamic version of this drill. Instead of starting directly in measure, start now from a longer distance requiring more than one step to bring you in short measure. Approach and strike at the target without interruption, while stepping.

Practise this drill slowly at first and increase your speed gradually, but do not go faster as long as you need to reduce your speed or mark a stop before aiming at the target. The goal here is to acquire the capacity to evaluate the distance while approaching the target and hit as soon as you are at the appropriate distance.

To increase difficulty, you may also vary the angles of attack and approach in sinuous lines.

Ideally, in order to avoid hard shocks and account for penetration of the blade, the target should yield to hits. Clothes-pegs on

a clothes-line hung at throat level make pretty suitable targets in this regard.

Moving target

This drill is adapted from Olivier Delannoy. It should be practised with secured blades exclusively and the partner holding the target should at least wear a fencing mask. You will also need a portable target such as a wooden plank with handles, a table tennis racket or a boxing pad.

The partner holding the target moves around facing the partner carrying the sword, keeping the target turned toward the floor. The latter follows the stepping of the former, trying to stay in measure. The target holder may raise the target at any time. At this signal, his partner must draw a thrust at the target if he is at the appropriate distance.

With a boxing pad or a racket, it is also possible to practice this drill with cuts.

Double threat

This exercise should be practised very slowly with secured blades and fencing masks. Full protective gear would be required should the partners decide to play faster.

One partner assumes any stance or guard that may please him and his two partners take a threatening position in measure.

The first partner must then find a way to evade the threats and stay out of the measure of both his partners while hitting at least one of them.

Both threatening partners should stay still for the whole duration of the exercise. However, in a variant of this drill, they may move slowly, at the same pace as the first partner, to check he really is at a safe distance.

The partners should always take their time in this exercise so as to be able to analyse the situation and practice safely.

This exercise may be practised with more than three partners.

Multiple attackers

This exercise should be performed imperatively with secured blades and full protective gear.

One partner must defend against the continuous attacks from several partners. His goal is to deal with as many successive attacks as he can.

Each attack must be launched as soon as the defender has parried the previous one and riposted, but not before.

Attackers should fully engage in their attacks and not try to adapt to the defender's parries.

When responding to an attack, the defender must keep control of his distance to other attackers in order to maintain them out of measure and thus ensure he has enough time to react to their attacks.

Chapter 7

The lines

This chapter will discuss the concept of lines in fencing.

There are four lines referring to the position of the blade relative to the opponent's sword while engaging, attacking or parrying: inside, outside, above or below.

Chapter 8

The guards

A guard is any posture that may be used to protect oneself while preparing an attack.

This chapter will present the nine guards that can be identified in the Yángjiā Mìchuán Tàijíjiàn Kūnlún sword form. These guards are not part of the traditional transmission. They are postures frequently encountered in the form that may correspond to the above definition of a guard.

Chapter 9

Free play

This chapter will discuss the various aspects of free sparring, including technical, tactical and strategic considerations.

Chapter 10

Martial applications

This chapter will present a selection of martial application from the Kūnlún sword routine of the Yángjiā Mìchuán Tàijíjiàn tradition. These applications will be selected as illustrations of the concepts discussed in other chapters.

Part IV

Tàijí principles

Chapter 11

The Tàijí classics

The Tàijí classics are texts written at the end of the XIX$^{\text{th}}$ century and composing a corpus common to all styles of Tàijíquán.

This chapter will, within the scope of fencing, discuss the principles of Tàijí described in these text and that will be developed further in the following chapters.

Chapter 12

Fluidity and transformation

Fluidity and transformation are fundamental notions in Tàijíquán and therefore in Tàijíjiàn. They result from the application of principles described in the Classics such as relaxation, understanding the Yīn/Yáng, etc.

Chapter 13

The Jing energies

This chapter will discuss the different Jing energies: Ding jing, Dong jing, Hua jing and Fa jing.

Chapter 14

The Sì Yāo

This chapter will present the Sì Yāo (Zhan, Nian, Lian, Sui) considered from a fencing point of view...

Chapter 15

The Yì

This chapter will present the various aspects of Yì in Tàijíjiàn from routine practice to free sparring...

Part V

Appendices

Appendix A

The Kūnlún sword routine

A short overview of this routine.

Appendix B

Glossary