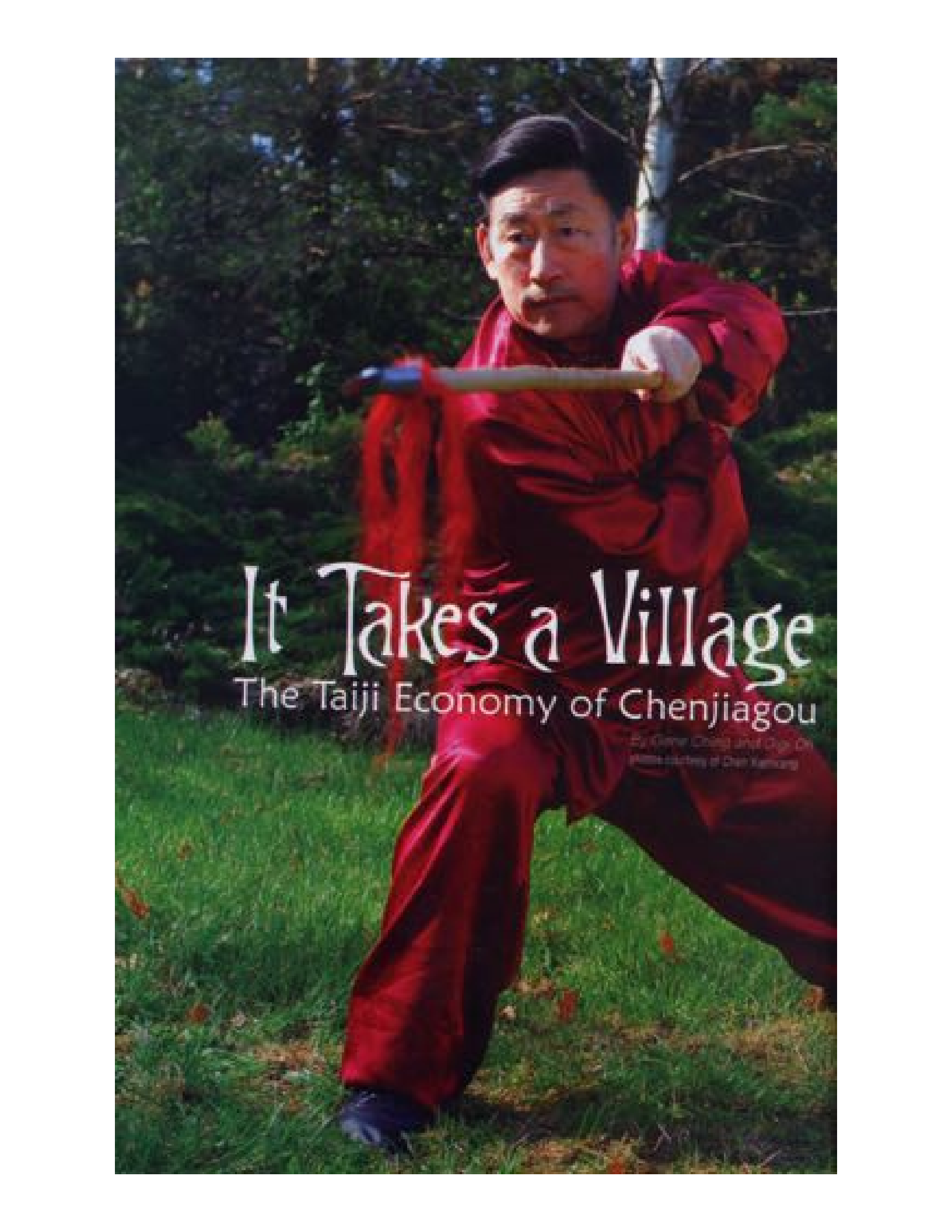


A man in a red Taiji uniform is captured in a dynamic pose, holding a sword horizontally across his chest. He is standing on a grassy field with trees in the background. The text "It Takes a Village" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font, and "The Taiji Economy of Chenjiagou" is overlaid in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it.

It Takes a Village

The Taiji Economy of Chenjiagou

By Gene Cheng and Qiguo Chen
Photos courtesy of Chen Jianrong

Grandmaster

Chen is a calm man. As one of the world's leading authorities in taiji, he radiates a quiet attitude betraying simple roots in a tiny rural village in central China. He has the stoic bearing of country folk who have worked the soil for food. His casual dress conceals a barrel chest and deceptively broad shoulders, the thick-bodied frame of solid farming stock. There's an honesty and authenticity about him. Plain and mild-mannered, he carries himself in a down-to-earth manner. Grandmaster Chen embodies iron wrapped in cotton.

Chen is one of the most common surnames in China. It has a recorded history that can be traced back to King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty who reigned from 1040 to 1043 BCE. Small villages adopt the name of the dominant clan. Consequently, there are many villages named Chen across China. However, only one is considered the cradle of taiji. Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang (陈鹤良) was born in Chenjiagou (literally "Chen family ditch" 陈家沟), a small farming village in Wenxian County in Henan Province, the very heart of China. There's a poetic couplet spoken at Chenjiagou: "He he chen guo sui dou hui jiao jiao sui" (喝喝陈国水，合合腿脚腿). Literally it means, "If you drink Chenjiagou water, your feet know how to kick," implying that Chen villagers know their martial arts. As one of the eminent masters of Chen taijiquan, Grandmaster Chen has blood that runs deep. His grandfather was Chen Fake (pronounced "fah-kay" not "fake" 陈发科 1867-1921), the creator of new frame (xinyou 新架) Chen taiji. Fake opened the Zhongzhou Institute in Beijing in 1928, bringing Chen taiji to what would become the nation's capital. Fake was the great grandson of Chen Changxing (陈长兴 1775-1831), who taught Yang Style founder Yang Luchan (杨露禅 1799-1872). Yang style is arguably the most practiced martial art in the world today. In the shadow of nearby Shaolin Temple, Chenjiagou actually is a tiny place. "It's less than a square kilometers across," says Chen in Mandarin. Nevertheless, the impact of this modest farming village on the martial arts world is staggering.

Back at the Farm

Chen was born just prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China. He remembers Chen Village from before China's turbulent late '60s. "It's quite different now. There were many beautiful buildings, Buddhist temples and statues – all destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. The temple was turned into a school. All the nice private residences were torn apart and sold. The old houses used to belong to landowners, so they had to turn them over to the farmers. The farmers didn't care. They just tore them down to get money. In the 1960s, we were hungry to die.

"Now the economy is better and people are building houses again, but they are different. Now we have paved roads and many new houses. Asphalt roads are very nice. There are still some old houses left with dirt floors, but gradually all will be changed to new buildings."



The main crops of Chenjiagou are wheat, corn, sweet potatoes and soy beans. It's very busy during the beginning of June for the wheat harvest and in mid-September for the corn harvest. Most of the villagers of Chenjiagou are poor farmers with very small plots of land. After they use what they grow to feed themselves, they trade what is left for spices, fertilizer and various necessities. There's no excess – no profit. Aside from farming, the only other potential source of income is teaching taiji.



"There are about 3000 villagers now," observes Chen. "That grew from 1000. In the past, 80% of the villagers practiced taiji, but now only about 60% of the people practice." The village has only one school – the Chenjiagou Taijiqiao Xueyuan under the direction of Chen Xiaowang's younger brother, Chen Xiaoping. Beyond that, there are a few scattered private instructors that teach out of their home. "There's also about a 1000 Chen villagers now living in Xian," adds Chen. "We had a big drought. There was no food so many went to Xian." But apart from that, most villagers never leave Chenjiagou.

"Why release energy from the body?"



Chen remembers seeing the first foreigners in Chenjiagou in the 1980s. They were Japanese pilgrims in search of the cradle of taiji, under the direction of Miura Hideo, who was an early supporter of Chen taiji masters. Chenjiagou is off the beaten path in China. If you want to go, you need to make a special trip, because it's in the country and there's not much else nearby. "We see less than 20 foreign students a year – in and out – and most stay for a very short time," says Chen. "Only a few stay longer."

The Fighting Chens

Chen style is renowned for its fighting ability, as demonstrated by the success of Chen competitors in taiji push-hands sparring competitions. Wenxian County used to hold push hands competitions, but in recent years that has subsided. "Push hands have died down," reflects Chen. "It used to be sponsored by the government, but it was cancelled after a few years. The government used to hold an annual rotating national event to test the concept. That went about seven or eight years. But now, most competitions are just taolu [forms JJJ]. "I hope push hands will revive. We're testing rules. When the system is good, it should revive. But it's not professional anymore. It's just village people now."

"Chen taiji does *sanda* [free sparring 散打] – an equivalent term to *sanshou*, but there aren't too many competitors in Chenjiagou. A lot of Chen kids still do *sanda*. For Chen fighters to do *sanda*, they must first learn the rules of the game. Chen practitioners are more agile. The tough part is to adjust to the rules."

Continued on following page



While most people have a hard time conceptualizing taiji in free-sparring matches, Chen taiji is a little different. "Usually people think of taiji's standard 24 or 48 *taolu*. But Chen has *panchui* (cannon strike) (炮锤), which is faster than Shaolin. After you learn qi flow, you can be fast."

Explosive Power

One of the unique characteristics of Chen taiji is explosive power or *fajin* (发劲). *Fajin* literally means to "issue strength" or "emit power." It's a dynamic motion that can't really be caught on film. It's too fast and too explosive. It happens in the blink of an eye and can be felt more than seen. "For *fajin*, we say 'yi yi xing qi' (the mind directs the qi) (以意行气). Qi must have no blockage. It must flow through your entire body. Beginners can't get the energy out. You can only get it out after a lot of time spent practicing. Beginners only get 40 to 50% out. After some practice, they can get 70 to 80%. Eventually it's 100%. We say it takes three years for a small success and nine years for the complete course. But now, people only practice for very short periods and only a few times a week, so they can't really achieve much. As for Yang style taiji, after it went to Beijing to be taught to the royal family, they took the *fajin* out. Those people are lazier. They didn't want to learn that. They just wanted to cultivate taiji for health. So they made it slower."

According to Grandmaster Chen, *fajin* is all about releasing the energy from the body. He believes a practitioner must achieve a state of naturalness, what the Chinese refer to as *ziran* (自然), and that this state must be carried through each and every movement for optimal performance. "All moves must follow *ziran*," states Chen. "Everything must be unblocked. If you have that foundation, then everything flows. Your mind must be quiet, and your body must be balanced with the earth. You must keep this foundation, even when you fight."

"Why release energy from the body? If you follow your energy and release it, you'll only benefit. There are no bad effects. When you have an explosion of energy, it increases your heartbeat and blood circulation. It improves your metabolism. If you follow this to your own ability, there's no problem. You'll get a good workout. But some people try to *fajin* without really following the flow of energy. They just want *fajin*. This is no good. Then you might hurt yourself."





A complete sequence of Chen Xiaowu's
Sixth Form



Taiji at Any Age

At age sixty-four, Chen is delighted to report that he still makes breakthroughs with his practice. "At my age, I was just hoping my taiji level would stay the same and not decay," confesses Chen. "In 1986, I felt my taiji jump a level. But in '90, my legs got hurt. Then I had an operation on my left knee in 2001 to remove some cartilage. Recently, I felt my skill jump to a higher level, and more naturally. In the past, I practiced *daojia yilu* (old frame first road—a standard form of Chen taiji 陈式)—81 four to five times and then rest. Now I can play it twenty times without rest. I don't even feel tired. The reason is I make fewer mistakes. It's like a car. Some cars are more efficient. One car gets 30 MPG. Another gets 40 MPG. Because I make fewer mistakes, my flow is better, so there's no barrier to my efficiency. So the quality of my practice has improved. I waste less of my energy. It surprised me. I never thought it would happen at my age. After my operation, I kept trying to correct my form, to make it more accurate. With each correction, I used less strength to achieve more. Now I feel nothing when I jump high.

"Even if someone gave me a million dollars, I would not change my situation. I've been trying to achieve this for over forty years. I was surprised when it came at the end of last year. Now, in the morning, I practice very quickly, ten to twenty times. I don't even need a single sip of water. It takes me about seven minutes per form, so it's still about two-and-a-half hours every morning.



"I practice very quickly, ten to twenty times. I don't even need a single sip of water."

I don't even warm up that much, just a little *zhan zhuang* (standing post meditation 站桩), and then my twenty repetitions. I sweat a little, but don't feel any fatigue. When I was young, I could not even achieve like that."

"If you eliminate all your mistakes, then your qi flows naturally. When energy flows, capacity increases. Everybody has the chance. Even old age is not a barrier for taiji practice."

Changing a Sword for a Brush

"Taijiquan can be used for anything," boasts Chen. "I went to Switzerland. Some of my students there were police and they took me to a pistol range. I had never held a gun before. I just used taiji principles and I did very well. I don't like to use both hands when I shoot. I like to use my right and left hands separately. The second time I went back, they awarded me 3rd place for the entire country for shooting at 25 meters."

Laoshi, Grandmaster Chen has taken up a calligraphy brush as part of his practice. Calligraphy is one of the most venerated art forms in Chinese culture. Chen claims to have many calligraphy teachers, but no formal ones. He has never taken disciple vows under a calligraphy master. Chen shares the secret behind his practice. "Any place I see calligraphy, I will study it. I have a lot of teachers, but the teachers don't know me. I recently saw some good calligraphy in a Japanese airport. I just stood before it and studied it. I've studied the classic masters too. I even study business signs. Any place, every place - if it interests me, I'll study it. Calligraphy and taiji are related. *Xie zi jiu shi na zhi bi da guan. Taiji jiu shi bu na bi xie zi* (Calligraphy is the same as having a brush in martial arts. Taiji is the same as not having a brush for calligraphy. 写字就是拿笔打拳·太极拳就是不拿笔写字.)"



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A black and white photograph of Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang in a Taijiquan pose. He is wearing a dark, traditional Chinese jacket and trousers. His right arm is extended forward, and his left arm is bent. The background is a light, textured surface.

"Teaching is very simple. There are two cups.
I pour my cup into your cup and that's it."

Continued from page 42: Chenjiagou

Grandmaster Chen has been offering his calligraphy for the last three years to raise funds to erect a statue of Chen Wangting in Chenjiagou. Chen Wangting (陳王廷1600-1680) is credited with first codifying Chen taiji. Chen is also hoping his calligraphy will fund another temple for Chen Changxing. His calligraphy currently commands \$550 per piece and Chen has managed to accumulate \$150,000 towards these projects. He estimates he'll need another \$300,000 to 400,000 to complete the job. He's also using a spectacular photo book for fundraising. Chen Family Taijiquan is a 334-page coffee table book that is selling for \$140 each.

Grandmaster Chen feels the future of Chenjiagou is bright. "When I go back to the village, we all get together and exchange skills. There are three languages for teaching Chen taiji. First is speaking. We discuss the principles. Second is body language - demonstrating how to use the body frame. And third is hand-to-hand. First we speak, then we communicate through body language and then, hand-to-hand."

"Teaching is very simple. There are two cups. I pour my cup into your cup and that's it. It's very simple. However, you need to know the position of the cup. If the cup is on the right and I pour to the left, we miss. If the cup has a lid, then it cannot accept. You must lift your lid for me to pour." ❀

Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang is a 19th generation direct descendant of the founder of Chen family Taijiquan and has also served as a deputy in the Chinese National People's Assembly (or parliament) elected from Taijiquan circles. He is acknowledged as the Standard Bear of Chen Family Taijiquan in the world. For more on Chen Xiaowang or to purchase some of his calligraphy, visit his website at www.chenxiaowang.com. Thanks to Tony Wong for his assistance with this article.