

Our own teacher Dan Docherty certainly used tai chi in the ring, as did his teacher Chen Tin Hung. But Dan also used his tai chi in street confrontations, especially during his time in the Royal Hong Kong Police.

Like every art, tai chi has its strengths and its weaknesses. No one art is martially complete: the Ultimate Fighting Championship has shown us this most clearly.

What therefore does tai chi do well? And what does it lack, or do badly? What does it share with other arts? And what makes it unique? These questions will help lay bare the function of tai chi, and illuminate the martial purpose of our training.

What is missing in tai chi?

I would say the most telling lack is that of real medium or long-range offensive techniques.

There are kicks and there are punches, but they almost always appear in conjunction with some sort of controlling, grabbing or parrying motion. Dan Docherty



used to characterise tai chi as a counter-attacking art, which is to say we have already closed distance (or the opponent has) and absorbed some kind of attack.

The eight forces are universal across tai chi. They are manipulations of the body, our own or the opponents, in a manner reminiscent of grappling. Hand strikes are not featured in this tactical scheme. But shoulder and elbow strikes are.

All of this indicates the effective range for tai chi: close-up, closer than boxing and kickboxing. However tai chi also lacks groundwork, so we will not be getting horizontal, in the manner of jiu jitsu: we want to take our opponent down, without going down ourselves.

We can sensibly suggest then, that tai chi is an art rooted in what might be called infighting. A definition of infighting is 'fighting at closer than arm's length'. In this limited environment, some standard techniques will not flourish: a boxing jab, for example, is just too long a technique at this range. Striking has to be done with forearms, hammer fists, chops and elbows. Kicks exist as knees, trips and stamps.

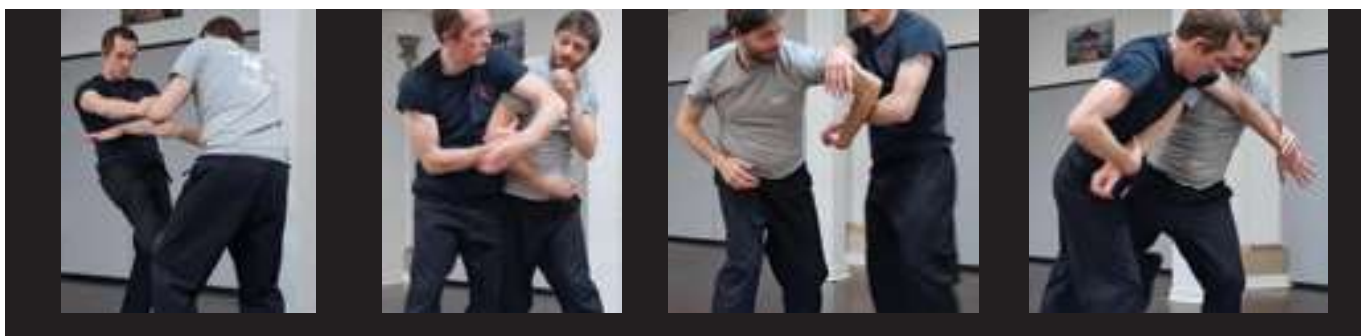
Once at the correct range, tai chi is not fussy about what to employ.

When we cast an eye over the techniques preserved in our (Wudang) handform, it is a strange menu, albeit one beautifully strung together.

There is a bit of everything: punches, kicks, throws, counters to kicks, locks, counters to locks, entries, neck and head manipulations and more.

Our tai chi is very much 'a jack of all trades, and master of none'

As a jack-of-all-trades, the key attribute for employing tai chi is opportunity. The *Tai Chi Classics* state 'many err by forsaking what is near to pursue what is far' (The *Tai Chi Chuan Ching*). The right technique is the one that is at hand, so to speak. The motifs in the *Tai Chi Classics* of the hovering hawk, and the waiting cat, also suggest the spirit of seizing the opportunity.



This makes the setting up of the technique of primary importance. But because this ‘setting up’ is not easily categorised, it is easily overlooked.

The above is our interpretation of tai chi, based on our style and studies, and a play-based training approach which we use to investigate our theories.

Getting into the right position, at the right range, is the speciality of tai chi

We see this clearly in the concept of chin zi, ‘reeling silk’. In our style, this takes the form of circular movements in a figure eight in front of us, both clockwise and anti-clockwise. The formal drill uses it against a slap to the face. It works better as a method to drill through/under/over an opponent's arms or past and behind their centre of balance.

What do you think? What is your tai chi for? 🇬🇧

We like to say that tai chi is ‘the intelligent and sensitive use of simple tools’

Tai chi does not have the elegantly deadly kicks of muay thai, the blistering combinations of boxing, or the complex transitions of jiu jitsu.

It spends its energies in absorbing attacks, clearing a path, and applying something short and simple in the gap created. It is not exactly defensive, because that would imply passivity: in tai chi we pro-actively create gaps in our opponent's defences. Maybe we could say it is anti-martial: designed to nullify other arts.

All of this is quite abstract compared to other martial arts, and it is perhaps this that creates the misunderstanding of tai chi's purpose, and leads to odd and unsure interpretations of its functions.

