



# TAI CHI

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# The Calligraphy of Taijiquan Footwork

by Yang Mingbin

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步  
法

**T**here are written records of immortals who can float on clouds, run across the surface of ponds, and walk over snow yet leave no trail. I've been fortunate to meet a few Daoist recluses in the Wudang Mountains, and I can understand why these myths began. I can assure you that these people are mortals, but with exceptional mental, physical, and spiritual gifts. Their fighting skills appear to exude the paranormal, but they sweat and fart as any normal folk. The clouds they float on through the sky may simply be their own gas vapors.

And float they do. Their martial movements glide with grace, accuracy, and speed, seemingly unhampered by physical laws. Their smoothness, variations in speed, and ability to change directions at will give the appearance of a master calligrapher's wielding an ink brush. Their physical movements appear to be more of liquid than bone.

When writing characters or painting a landscape, the brush is held upright. The bamboo shaft is the spine, and the brush leaves its tracks. So soft and flexible are the brush hairs, that they immediately convey the intentions . . . even the spirit of the writer. Such ideas are conveyed in the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*, a brilliant work commissioned by Shen Xinyou. I am euphoric seeing how the movements of a brush tip find parallel in the foot and leg movements of my Daoist hermit teachers. I'll try to write down the parallels I see between these arts.

First, like the softest of goat hair, the feet and ankles of the Daoist masters are relaxed at ease, capable of moving smoothly in any direction on a compass at will. For calligraphers, the vertical directions up and down in relation to the paper are just as important, as are the martial artist's lifting and setting feet in relation to the ground. Like the brush, the feet are guided by intention, unhampered in any way. Rather than characters, the martial artist is spontaneously creating the footwork of combat techniques.

Lowering the brush toward paper, the tip—just one or two hairs—touch first, then more according to the desired thickness. With variations



Michael DeMarco demonstrating sword form footwork



Michael DeMarco demonstrating sword form footwork



in directional movements to make any stroke, the hairs move at the artist's will, reflecting the mind's intent. Lowering the front leg toward the ground, the toes—perhaps just the largest—touch first, then the rest of the foot incrementally meets the ground. The ankle and knee act as hinges, bending and easing the contact with the ground, especially helpful when landing from jumping maneuvers.

Lifting reverses the process. For the brush, as the handle is slowly lifted, more and more hairs leave the paper until the last hair at the tip loses contact. Raising the leg is similar to raising the brush handle. The knee starts upward, lifting the heel and lastly the toes.



The feet barely leave the ground when moving in any direction. Often they skim over the ground surface sensing the terrain as the body make transitions between postures. On a smooth dirt surface, foot patterns remain—showing linear or curving actions according to the requirements of the whole-body movement. When one leg is bearing weight, the other leg's foot may be lightly set on the ground, as in play lute with the heel on the ground, or in stork spreads wings with the ball of the foot on the ground. In these types of stances, the front leg should be relaxed enough that when the waist and shoulders move left or right, there is also movement in the foot. This will leave a swivel mark on the ground much like the mark left when the calligrapher turns the shaft, and the brush hairs turn. Thus, the foot patterns on the ground surface will leave every type of brush

**A1-2 :**

As the unweighted left front foot is drawn in toward the right foot, the heel rises slight and the movement from the ball of the foot leaves a faint trail in the soft dirt.



movement: horizontal, vertical, dot, curved, rising, falling, turning, hook, and various combinations.

Remember that brush movements contain simultaneous actions, such as a slow downward movement letting the brush slightly touch the paper but moving as more of the brush presses wider, circling and lifting for a thin line moving into another direction then heavily downward into a perfectly elongated line. All such brush movements are easily seen when done with a “dry brush” technique—when the brush is not so wet—so many individual hair markings are visible on the paper.

The parallels between brush and foot movements hint at the qualities needed to make them. One is great sensitivity. A good calligrapher can feel the paper even when only one hair of the brush touches it. A good martial



**B1-3 :**

Much like a Chinese writing brush being lifted by its handle, the unweighted front foot is slowly lifted by the thigh muscles. During the lifting sequence, the knee immediately bends like a hinge, followed by the ankle bending with the heel rising and the sole gradually rising off the ground degree by degree. With the knee raised high, the toes point down resembling the tip of the brush.



**C1-2 :**  
An unweighted front foot rests lightly on the heel, as in Play Lute. If one turns left, as to Embrace Moon, the toe moves. It does not move by itself but is initiated by the waist turning left. The turn on the heel will leave a swivel in the dirt.



artist feels the terrain as well as any pressure that touch the legs. One must also be relaxed so either brush or leg can be moved with dexterity. For self-defense, such qualities allow many effective leg techniques. At the same time, knowing that stiff legs are easily attacked, cultivating sensitivity and dexterity in the legs provide measures of safety.

**D :** Showing a turn to the right, the foot simultaneously turns and lowers as the back heel rises. The waist initiates the movement in both legs and feet.



**E1-3**  
With the turn of the waist left, the unweighted left leg is moved in a curve from front to back, leaving a curve in the soft dirt. This technique is often used as a trip or as part of a throw.

**F1-2**

If the movement continues as shown in C1-2, the left toe gradually meets the ground and the right heel simultaneously rises. It not only rises but turns as the waist moves to align over the left foot. The back heel is following the waist. The front heel and the back ball of the foot will leave swivel marks on the ground.



### G1-3

An unweighted foot should turn under the direction of the waist, and not move independently. In this example, you see a Ward Off-type of step. The right toe faces in the same direction as the waist in making the step outward. The leg turns on the heel under the impetus of the waist. The right foot comes to rest with the toes in the standard bow stance. The right heel will leave a swivel mark on the ground.





**Credits:**

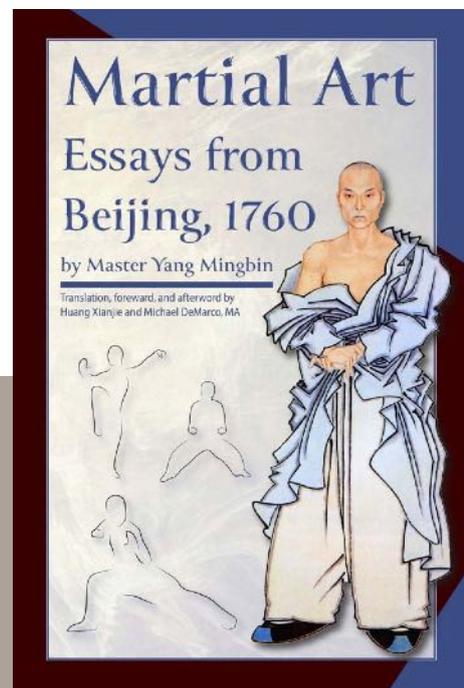
1) Foot and leg photos:  
Photography by Gail Springer.

2) Full-body photos:  
Photography by Jose Castille.

3) Calligraphy photo:  
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3. This article is an abstract from a new book entitled, " Martial Art - Essays from Beijing 1760 " by Master Yang Mingbin. Translated, forward and afterword by Huang Xan-jie and Michael DeMarco MA. To find out more details about this book kindly go to this link below:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Martial-Art-Essays-Beijing-1760/dp/1893765989>



**About The Author**

Michael DeMarco founded Via Media Publishing in order to publish the Journal of Asian Marital Arts, a peer-reviewed quarterly with high academic and aesthetic standards.

He studied various martial arts but remained focused on kuntao-silat and taiji.

Michael continues his full-time work by producing new anthologies and books. Part-time he enjoys teaching Chen and Yang taijiquan, and kuntao-silat in Santa Fe, NM. As a scholar/practitioner, he somehow maintains a fine yin-yang balance between teaching and publishing.