

Additional comments on Taiji Sword (1936) by Wu Tunan

Just to be clear: all comments below are strictly mine, they are not part of the original text or Paul Brennan's translation. /Mattias Nyrell

A note on my annotations

Paul Brennan did a great work translating Taiji Sword (1936) by Wu Tunan. I am very glad he made it accessible for study for us that cannot read or speak Chinese.

The latest version of Paul Brennan's translation is available here:

<https://brennantranslation.wordpress.com/2015/11/25/wu-style-taiji-sword-qiankun-jian/>

The version with my annotations is available here:

<https://jianfa.se/WTN>

My main interest in this book is to compare the form and sword methods it contains with what we practice in our own lineage (PTCCI, Dan Docherty, Cheng Tinhung). To do this I felt that I needed some extra annotations, including mainly:

- The Chinese characters and pinyin has been added directly to the English translation for key terms such as basic sword methods and technique names.
- I have kept the original formatting (or lack there of) to a large extent, but added some formatting for multiline quotations, and added paragraph breaks at the points where Wu Tunan repeats the same descriptive phrases in all the technique descriptions ("Your right|left foot...", "At the same time...", "You are facing..."). I realized this was much needed after trying to penetrate the quite dense wall of text that is the technique descriptions.
- In general just make it readable in a printed version that can be brought with you when training. For my own personal use I have printed it with a spiral binding as I find this most convenient.

A note about WTN's book itself

I find this book quite an impressive work. WTN was obviously a very structured writer, he keeps strictly to the same structure of describing the techniques throughout the book:

- <stepping and positionng>
- <sword and hand movements>
- <repeat the above as needed...>
- <finally: state where you are facing in the final position>
- <explain the application>



The directions are explained in a positioning chart like a compass, except the directions are labled front, rear, left, right - where front is the direction you face when starting the form (WTN facing the camera).

The form consist of a sequence of 85 techniques, but since many of these have been split into multiple parts to be easier to explain, the second chapter of the book has 128 sections covering these techniques, each with a photo and detailed description.

For most of the techniques an application against an opponent with a spear is given to explain the form technique. Only once the opponent is said to attach with a sword instead of a spear (see [39] CHOPPING OPEN THE GATE), since it is so rare it might be argued that it is a misprint.

A note on the 8 sword methods of the WTN sword book

Understanding a style's sword methods is a very important part of learning a Chinese sword art, as these point out which moves are considered of fundamental importance in that particular style.

The same 8 named sword methods are in use in our own lineage (Cheng Tinhung, Dan Docherty lineage), but they are sometimes interpreted differently. This book also discusses how the current set of 8 sword methods have developed from an earlier set of only 4 methods. These 4 methods are still included in the sword methods practiced in the northern Wu style.

When I started to look at the text, I found it very interesting that this book gives very detailed "sub methods" for many of the 8 sword methods. My (somewhat naive) hope was that Wu Tunan would explain the sword methods in detail, and actually use them and the main methods when discussing the form and applications for each technique. Unfortunately this was not really the case, but I have still annotated all occurrences of any of the sword methods listed in chapter 3 when it occurs anywhere in the book in relation to a sword action.

I have also added annotations for other interesting terms that are used to describe the form and applications. Sometimes these are considered sword methods in other styles.

It is important to understand that the sword methods, at least as we use them in our lineage, is jargon terminology with a quite specific meaning not limited to the strict dictionary meaning. However sometimes the words simply are used in the normal dictionary meaning too, and I think it is clear from reading the text that this is very often how they are used in this book.

NOTE: After I started investigating the sword methods of the WTN book, I found out that WTN copied large part of chapter 3, where he discusses the sword methods, from an earlier book by 宋廣平 Song Gengping, the title varies depending on the edition but the first edition was written 1896 and possibly published in 1897, with other revised editions from 1908 (劍學法要新編 jiàn xué fǎ yào xīn biān), 1912, 1920 and 1929. As far as I know there is no English translation. But this book contains more detailed information about these exact sword methods, so a detailed investigation of the 8 sword methods must take that into account.

More information can be found here:

<https://jianfa.se/SGP>

WTN sword method terms used in technique names

This section investigates how frequently the characters of the sword methods are used in technique names? Only unique names are considered, so "Golden Needle Points to the South" is only counted once, even though it occurs twice in the form sequence.

Note that just because the same character is used in the technique name as in the sword method, it is not necessarily the case that it is the sword method that is intended, it might as well just be the normal dictionary meaning of the character.

提 tí LIFTING - Occurs in 4 technique names

- 翻身提斗 Fānshēn tī dòu [21] Turn Around, Lift the Ladle
- 魁星提筆 Kuíxīng tí bǐ [38] Kuixing Takes Up His Pen
- 左右提鞭 Zuǒyòu tí biān [46] Lifting the Rod on Both Sides
 - Note: Sub-methods: zuǒ tí, yòu tí
- 進步提撩 Jìnbù tí liāo [53] Advance, Lift & Raise

撩 liāo RAISING - Occurs in 3 technique names

- 進步撩膝 Jìnbù liāo xī [12] Advance, Raising to the Knee
- 退步撩陰 Tuìbù liāo yīn [26] Retreat, Raising Cut to the Groin
- 進步提撩 Jìnbù tí liāo [53] Advance, Lift & Raise

刺 cì STABBING - Occurs in 1 technique name

- 逆鱗刺 Nílín cì [18] Assassinating the Emperor

橫 héng - Occurs in 1 technique name

- 橫掃千軍 Héngsǎo qiān jūn [58] Sweeping Aside a Thousand Soldiers

倒 dào RELEASING - Occurs in 1 technique names

- 倒掛金鈴 Dào guàjīn líng [14] Hanging the Golden Bell Upside Down

Other "sword method terms" used in technique names

This section performs the same analysis on other interesting terms that are not part of the 8 sword methods:

掛 guà HANGING - Occurs in 3 technique names

- 掛劍式 Guà jiàn shì [8] Hanging the Sword
- 倒掛金鈴 Dào guàjīn líng [14] Hanging the Golden Bell Upside Down
- 翻身披掛 Fānshēn pīguà [52] Turn Around, Spread & Hang

點 diǎn DOT - Occurs in 3 technique names

- 回身點 Huíshēn diǎn [19] Turn Around, Tap
- 眉中點赤 Méi zhōng diǎn chì [33] Making a Red Spot Between the Eyebrows
- 蜻蜓點水 Qīngtíng diǎn shuǐ [65] Dragonfly Skims the Water

劈 pī CHOPPING/CLEAVING - Occurs in 2 technique names

- 回身劈劍 Huíshēn pī jiàn [11] Turn Around, Chopping Sword
- 劈山奪寶 Pīshān duó bǎo [17] Cleave Open the Mountain and Seize the Treasure

擊 jī STRIKING - Occurs in 1 technique names

- 撒身擊 Piē shēn jī [60] Torso-Flung Strike

洗 xǐ CLEARING - Occurs in 1 technique names

- 抱頭洗 Bàotóu xǐ [61] Cover Your Head and Wash

Occurrences of sword methods in the descriptions

This is a frequency analysis of the occurrence of sword methods (and other interesting terms) that relate to the use of the sword.

Only the technique and application descriptions in chapter 2 have been included. Only occurrences that relate to the actual sword actions have been included.

For example lifting of the feet (tí), withdrawing the spear (chōu), placing the sword fingers "crosswise" (héng) above the head, and similar descriptions have **not** been included!

The method of counting these occurrences, have been to first annotate the text in chapter 2 at the correct places, and then count the actual annotations.

Sword method / Term	Translation	Count
劈 pī	CHOPPING CLEAVING	56
掛 guà	HANGING	54
刺 cì	STABBING	49
上提 shàng tí	upper lifting	42
撩 liāo	RAISING	22
橫 héng	CROSSING	14
格 gé	BLOCKING	12
提 tí	LIFTING	10
擊 jī	STRIKING	7
點 diǎn	DOT	5
崩 bēng	FLICKING	4
提撩 tí liāo	LIFTING RAISING	3
划 huá	SCRATCHING	3
反撩 fǎn liāo	reverse raising	3
平撩 píng liāo	level raising	2
上撩 shàng liāo	upper raising	1
截 jié	Intercepting with the edge	1
捋 lǚ	ROLLBACK	1

The 8 sword methods

The 4 classical methods

A discussion of the 8 sword methods of the WTN sword book

砍 kǎn CHOPPING: The first of sword methods that Wu Tunan defines, yet it is not used a single time for describing the form, the applications or in the technique names. The character actually used instead is 劈 pī CHOPPING/-CLEAVING. Kǎn is the character you would use for felling a tree, pī is what you would use for splitting a log.

There are 13 sub methods of kǎn, some of which the interpretation is clear, e.g. chopping while advancing/retreating/turning around and diagonal/lower/upper/rightward/leftward chopping. Some of the others are not as obvious: level/upright/smooth/horizontal chopping.

撩 liāo RAISING: Like tí this term also describes the sword going up, but when liāo is used it seems to be more related to a upward sweeping cut rather than "just lifting". Sometimes shàng tí is used in the description of the form movement but liāo in the description of the application.

There are 11 sub methods for liāo, but only two are actually used in the descriptions: 反撩 fǎn liāo REVERSE RAISING and 上撩 shàng liāo UPPER RAISING. But there is also another related term used: 提撩 tí liāo LIFTING RAISING. Many of the sub methods follow the same categories as for kǎn, but diagonal CHOPPING has been replaced with hooked RAISING, and there are no RAISING while moving. Instead the hooked and reverse RAISING are introduced.

Without understanding the sub methods in detail one can still speculate that this makes a sort of sense if kǎn are mainly cuts that chops down from above, while liāo are mainly cuts that raise up from below. It is reasonable that any way that can cut down can also be reversed into a raising cut.

摸 mō SMEARING: This term is not used a single time for describing the form, the applications or in the technique names. It has two sub methods: SMEARING to the hand and to the throat.

刺 cì STABBING: This is a sword method that is used a lot as a generic term for stabbing. The specified sub methods are stabbing to the throat, chest, lower abdomen and the crotch.

抽 chōu DRAWING: This term is not used a single time for describing the form, the applications or in the technique names. However it is used very frequently to describe the spear attacker withdrawing his spear.

"It is called "drawing" because it is a moment of drawing back and watching for what the opponent will do next. Without a quality of drawing back, the sword techniques will have advance but not retreat, hardness but not softness."

提 tí LIFTING: This term is used stand-alone in 10 places in the text and the sub method 上提 shàng tí UPPER LIFTING occurs 42 times making it the most commonly occurring sub method. In total there are 6 sub methods.

橫 héng CROSSING: This term is often used in the text for sweeping movements with the sword, either in defense or offense.

倒 dào RELEASING: The way this sword method is defined the most enigmatic of them all.

Going by Brennan's translation it is not really a sword method at all, but rather how to perform the form, stating that the other seven sword methods should "all have a quality of moving freely". Then going on to list 6 examples of types of RELEASING: high above, straight ahead, turning back, lifting up, making an arc, smoothly flicking. None of which make much sense in the context of RELEASING, at least not to me.

Feeding this paragraph (倒法者，縱跳起舞之謂也。以上七法，凡有縱跳之處，皆倒也。有高縱、矯縱、迴縱、起縱、環縱、順跳、……等倒法。) to various AI (tested with Claude, Grok and ChatGPT) results in an interpretation of various method of leaping. It is a practical interpretation that makes the sub methods more reasonable, so it is worth investigating further I think. It also agrees with the interpretation I have been given by Chinese speaking people, both from within Tai Chi Chuan and from those that have studied the Song Gengping book.

In the context of leaping the term RELEASING also makes some sense, since that kind of relaxation increases the quality of the movements including the leaps.

But then there is also the statement in the beginning of chapter 3 that both héng and dào has to do with the classical sword method 擊 jī STRIKING. It is unclear how this goes together with dào as RELEASING, or leaping, and a quality of moving freely. Unless what is intended is striking while leaping forward for example.

Dào is also used in the sub methods 倒砍 dào kǎn and 倒撩 dào liāo and here dào has been translated, in the more normal dictionary sense, as overturned.

In our lineage the translation and meaning of this method is inverted, meaning the situation where the tip is pointing down and the grip is pointing up.

The 8 sword methods of Cheng Tinhung lineage

The names of these 8 sword methods are the same as in the Wu Tunan sword book, but their interpretation differ in some cases.

I get the feeling that someone once decided to standardize on 8 sword methods (we also have 8 jin and 8 methods each for sabre and spear). Then 2 of these was assigned to the very general methods of chopping and stabbing, saving the other 6 for the more specialized methods.

It is important to keep in mind that in reality a given technique may incorporate elements of more than one method at the same time.

Regarding the 8 characters below all except heng look the same in traditional or simplified characters.

Besides the pinyin I have also added Cantonese Jyutping and approximate English spelling.

Method name and interpretation	Dictionary meaning
砍 kǎn ham2, "hum" To chop.	[MDBG] hack, chop, cut, fell [LangCh] [1] [v] hack; chop; cut; fell (trees, etc.) [2] [v] throw at [ZhongWen] chop
撩 liáo liu4, "lee-oh" To stir. Diversion and slash in a continous movement.	[MDBG] lift up, raise; leave, depart liáo: stitch / take / tease liào: lift up (skirt) / pull up (sleeve) [LangCh] [1] [v] lift up; raise; hold up [2] [v] sprinkle [3] [v] provoke; excite; stir up; tease; tantalize [4] disorderly; confused
摸 mō mo2, "moh" To stroke. Subtle circular diversion.	[MDBG] gently touch with hand; caress mō: feel with the hand / to touch / to stroke / to grope / to feel (one's pulse) mó: imitate / copy [LangCh] [1] [v] gently touch with the hand; caress; feel or touch lightly with fingers [2] [v] grope [3] [v] try to find out; feel out [4] [v] seek after; try to get at [ZhongWen] touch, stroke, seek

刺 cì ci3, "tsih" To stab/pierce.	[MDBG] stab; prick, irritate; prod thorn / sting / prick / pierce / stab / thrust / assassinate / murder [LangCh] [1] [v] pierce; stab; prick [2] [v] irritate; stimulate [3] [n] thorn; splinter; small fishbones; sting [4] [v] assassinate [5] [n] name card [ZhongWen] Use knife 刀 like thorn 束 prick, jab, spur, thorn
抽 chōu cau1, "chow" To draw forth. Diverting upwards with a whipping action.	[MDBG] draw out, pull out; sprout to draw out / to smoke (cigarettes) / to pump [LangCh] [1] [v] draw out; pull out or open [2] [v] sprout; put forth shoots; bud [3] [v] rid; take way [4] [v] whip; lash [5] [v] smoke (cigarettes, etc.) [6] [v] shrink [ZhongWen] pull out, draw, sprout
提 tí tai4, "tie" To lift. An upward diversion.	[MDBG] hold in hand; lift in hand to carry (hanging down from the hand) / to lift / to put forward / to mention / (upwards character stroke) / lifting (brush stroke in painting) / a scoop for measuring liquid [ZhongWen] lift, raise, carry, propose, mention [LangCh] [1] [v] hold or take in the hand [2] [v] lift by hand; pull up; arouse; raise; carry [3] [v] cause to rise or happen [4] [v] mention; bring forward; suggest; propose (a motion, etc.) [5] [v] obtain; make delivery; draw out [6] [v] mange; control [7] a rising stroke in Chinese writing [8] surname

橫 héng waang4, "wahng" To sweep across. Horizontal diversion followed by a thrust. Simplified character: 横	[MDBG] across, horizontal, lateral héng: horizontal / across / (horizontal character stroke) hèng: unruly [ZhongWen] héng: Horizontal, horizontal calligraphy stroke, boldly hèng: unexpected, unreasonable [LangCh] [1] cross-grained; perverse [2] presumptuous and unreasonable [3] unexpected; uncalled for [4] violent; cross [5] crosswise; horizontal; lateral [6] east to west or vice versa [7] by the side; sideways [8] [v] move crosswise; traverse [9] unrestrainedly; turbulently [10] a Chinese family name
倒 dào dou2, "doh" To invert. Diverting to the side, sword pointed down.	[MDBG] fall over; lie down; take turns dǎo: to fall / to collapse / to topple / to change (trains or buses) / to fail / bankrupt dào: upset / turn over / to tip / to pour / to go home / to the contrary / inverted [LangCh] [1] but; and yet [2] [v] inverse; place upside down; in reverse order or the wrong direction [3] [v] pour out; empty [4] on the contrary [5] after all [ZhongWen] dǎo: fall down dào: invert, reverse, pour out, empty

The english translation is from "Tai Chi Sabre Sword Spear" by Cheng Tin-Hung.

The dictionary references used are:

[MDBG] <https://www.mdbg.net/chinese/dictionary>

[LangCh] <http://www.chineselanguage.org/>

[ZhongWen] <http://zhongwen.com/>

The form list of the Wu Tunan Taiji Sword form

太極乾坤劍 tài jí qián kūn jiàn

1	[1] Taiji Posture.....	p30
2	[2] Catch the Sparrow by the Tail.....	p31
3	[5] Golden Needle Points to the South.....	p34
4	[6] Exchanging the Sword.....	p35
5	[7] Spreading the Sword to the Side.....	p36
6	[8] Hanging the Sword.....	p37
7	[9] Big Dipper Posture.....	p38
8	[10] Step Forward, Covering the Knee.....	p39
9	[11] Turn Around, Chopping Sword.....	p40
10	[12] Advance, Raising to the Knee.....	p41
11	[13] Crouching Tiger Guards the Gate.....	p42
12	[14] Hanging the Golden Bell Upside Down.....	p43
13	[15] Sword to the Crotch.....	p44
14	[16] Facing the Stream, Angling for a Fish.....	p45
15	[17] Cleave Open the Mountain and Seize the Treasure.....	p46
16	[18] Assassinating the Emperor.....	p47
17	[19] Turn Around, Tap.....	p48
18	[20] Duke Pei Beheads the Snake.....	p49
19	[21] Turn Around, Lift the Ladle.....	p50
20	[22] Ape Stretches Out Its Arm.....	p51
21	[23] Zilu Asks for Directions to Ford the River.....	p52
22	[24] Li Guang Shoots an Arrow into a Boulder.....	p53
23	[25] Colorful Phoenix Stretches Out Its Wings.....	p54
24	[26] Retreat, Raising Cut to the Groin.....	p55
25	[29] Crouching Tiger Guards the Gate.....	p58
26	[30] Rowing the Boat.....	p59
27	[32] Going with the Current to Push the Boat.....	p61
28	[33] Making a Red Spot Between the Eyebrows.....	p62
29	[34] Stance-Turning Sword.....	p63
30	[37] Maiden Fits the Needle.....	p66
31	[38] Kuixing Takes Up His Pen.....	p67
32	[39] Chopping Open the Gate.....	p68
33	[40] Crouching Tiger Guards the Gate.....	p69
34	[41] Capturing the Giant Turtle under the Sea.....	p70
35	[43] Turn Around, Lifting the Ladle.....	p72
36	[44] Turning over the Arm.....	p73
37	[45] Advance, Planting Sword.....	p74
38	[46] Lifting the Rod on Both Sides.....	p75
39	[48] Fallen Blooms Waiting for the Broom.....	p77
40	[49] Crouching Tiger Guards the Gate.....	p78
41	[50] Fallen Blooms Waiting for the Broom.....	p79
42	[51] Crouching Tiger Guards the Gate.....	p80
43	[52] Turn Around, Spread & Hang.....	p81

44	[53]	Advance, Lift & Raise.....	p82
45	[54]	Embracing the Moon.....	p83
46	[55]	Single Whip.....	p84
47	[56]	Guarding Sword under the Elbow.....	p85
48	[57]	Trying to Scoop the Moon's Reflection from the Water....	p86
49	[58]	Sweeping Aside a Thousand Soldiers.....	p87
50	[60]	Torso-Flung Strike.....	p89
51	[61]	Cover Your Head and Wash.....	p90
52	[62]	Kuixing Takes Up His Pen.....	p91
53	[63]	Swallow Enters Its Nest.....	p92
54	[64]	Quick Cat Catches the Mouse.....	p93
55	[65]	Dragonfly Skims the Water.....	p94
56	[66]	Wasp Enters Its Hive.....	p95
57	[67]	Old Man Carries His Zither.....	p96
58	[68]	Waving the Flag Three Times.....	p97
59	[77]	Spreading the Clouds to See the Sun.....	p106
60	[79]	Skillful Hand Plucking the Stars.....	p108
61	[80]	Facing the Wind to Brush Off the Dust.....	p109
62	[86]	Fierce Tiger Leaps over the Stream.....	p115
63	[87]	Swallow Pecks Mud.....	p116
64	[88]	Withdrawing Step, Reverse Checking.....	p117
65	[89]	Left & Right Flopping Fish.....	p118
66	[91]	Spreading the Hands, Waving the Flag.....	p120
67	[95]	Yellow Dragon Turns Around.....	p124
68	[96]	Spread the Grass to Find the Snake.....	p125
69	[102]	Golden Dragon Twitches Its Tail.....	p131
70	[104]	White Snake Flicks Its Tongue.....	p133
71	[107]	Rukh Spreads Its Wings.....	p136
72	[108]	Rein in the Horse to Watch the Tide.....	p137
73	[109]	Embracing the Moon.....	p138
74	[110]	Single Whip.....	p139
75	[111]	Black Dragon Swings Its Tail.....	p140
76	[112]	Hawk Goes through the Forest.....	p141
77	[120]	Rukh Spreads Its Wings.....	p149
78	[121]	Farmer Uses His Hoe.....	p150
79	[122]	Chopping Open the Gate.....	p151
80	[123]	Grand Duke Jiang Fishes.....	p152
81	[124]	Turn Around, Exchanging the Sword.....	p153
82	[125]	Prop Up the Beam to Replace the Pillar.....	p154
83	[126]	Golden Needle Points to the South.....	p155
84	[127]	Gathering in the Sword.....	p156
85	[128]	Return to the Taiji Posture.....	p157