

# Baguazhang

for Wellness

OR WAR

By Meng Tao with Christopher Pei

**A**ccording to historical documents, *Baguazhang* was created during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) by Dong Haichuan (董海川 1813–1882), who was from a small village called Wenan (文安) in Hebei Province. An ardent fan of martial arts, Dong Haichuan began training in his youth. He grew to become a well-seasoned traveler, and during a visit to southern China, he became influenced by Daoism. Dong mixed Daoist concepts with what he had learned to create what is now known as *Baguazhang* (八卦掌). Later, Dong ran afoul of the law after killing a man. He escaped by committing himself to work for the manor of Lord Su (肃王府). The lord noticed how good Dong was with his martial art, so he put him in charge of security for the entire estate. Soon after, Dong Haichuan became famous for *Baguazhang*. Students who had already trained in other styles and achieved high Kung Fu skills came flocking from all over to learn from him. From this group, two arose as the most gifted: Yin Fu (尹福) and Cheng Tinghua (程廷华). After Dong passed away, Yin and Cheng took the style and combined it with their own techniques, transforming it into the two most prominent flourishing lineages currently practiced today: Yin style and Cheng style *Baguazhang*.

*Bagua*, or the eight trigrams, gets the name from a verse in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* or, as more popularly known in the West, *I-Ching* 易经). It is said, “Wuji generates Taiji. Taiji generates two complementary forces. Two complementary forces generate four aggregates. Four aggregates generate eight trigrams. Eight trigrams determine myriads of phenomena. (无极生太极, 太极生两仪, 两仪生四象, 四象生八卦, 八卦生万物)”. The eight refers to the cardinal directions and the ordinal directions: North, North-East, East, South-East, South, South-West, West and North-West. Zhang in Chinese means “palm.” This style differs from most other martial arts because of its distinguishing use of open-handed palm strikes instead of using fists (*quan* 拳). *Quan* is the most common suffix for Chinese martial arts styles, so the term *Baguazhang* is unusual; *Baguaquan* would be more likely.





*Baguazhang* is also parallel to the *Book of Changes*, so the total number of palm movements is sixty-four, just like the possible combinations in the Book. This style involves lots of walking, body-turning, twisting, and changing body postures and palm skills. The eight basic palm movements match the eight trigrams. When practiced, it requires walking in circles with swinging-step (*baibu* 摆步) and hooking-step (*koubu* 扣步) footwork within directional changes. It walks through all eight directions, which differs from most other styles of Kung Fu that walk a straight line or covers four corners.

## Walking in Circles

Over the course of the development of Chinese martial arts, many styles and forms have been created. Almost all have been heavily influenced by ancient Chinese philosophy and Chinese medicine. Within Chinese martial arts, it is said, "The fist is easy, originating in medical logic (*quan qi yu yi, li cheng yu yi* 拳起于易, 理成于医)." This influence of Chinese philosophy and medicine explains why Chinese martial arts are imbued with wisdom, health-improving effects and medicinal value. Along with the emphasis on palms, *Baguazhang* focuses on strengthening the tendons and overall physical development, as well as core combat principles.

Any style of Kung Fu has its unique practicing methods and requirements. The relationship between body actions and skills is like that of leaves and roots. Instead of the forms, the postures and basic skills of waist and limbs combine to balance the dynamic and static movements in the body's internal milieu. Such skill is the distinctive quality of internal Kung Fu. For *Baguazhang*, the focus is upon the practice of the palms, the steps going first, the body moving with the palm and the *baibu* and *koubu* steps. This will help develop and hone the practitioner's agility and flexibility, as well as strengthen the legs.

*Baguazhang* is a martial art that is centered on fluidly and constantly changing movements while moving in a circle. This circle is formed using the practitioners

own arm length as a measure to outline the radius of the circle. When a practitioner walks along this *Baguazhang* circle, it should take eight steps to complete one rotation. These eight steps are directly connected to the theory and principles of *Bagua*. These movements, when combined with the proper breathing techniques (*tuna* 吐纳) and guiding exercises (*daoyin* 导引) can harness the individual's strength and allow it to be used in the form. Proper *Baguazhang* walking requires *qi* sinking to *dantian* (丹田) and complete mental concentration. This combines internal and external training. The practitioner can deliver powerful strikes while remaining in constant motion. The *Baguazhang* stylist never has to stop moving. The feet are in continuous motion even when applying a block or strike.

The basic steps of *Baguazhang* are the mud-wading steps (*tangnibu* 趟泥步) and swinging-hooking steps (*baikoubu* 摆扣步). A practitioner begins with the Basic Eight Palms (基础八





掌) to build up a strong foundation. Then the Big Eight Palms (八大掌) are used for the primary striking techniques to enhance combat skills.

## To Your Health

*Baguazhang* training emphasizes the harmony of body and mind with physical agility and fast footwork. Both palm methods and body movements are constantly twisting and turning which is consistent with the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) emphasis on the meridians and tendons (*jinjing* 经筋). In TCM, it is believed that the tendons and bones have close relationship with the liver and kidneys. Tendons attach to bones, connecting joints and controlling muscles. For TCM, the tendon (*jīn*) is the extremity of liver and the root of the nails. *Baguazhang* is a good training method for *jīn*, stretching and fostering strength, which by TCM theory results in nourishing the liver. If the liver energy is stagnant, the *jīn* might stick together and form a tubercle that impedes

### Mud-wading steps



joint motion, or the *jīn* might wither and shrink inwardly to cause loose joints or even outright weakening. *Baguazhang* is good Kung Fu for exercising and improving *jīn*; it has many muscle tendon change (*yijing* 易筋) methods for strengthening the *jīn* and prolonging bones. This opens *jīn* channels, increasing their elasticity and allowing energy to flow through more easily. The blood and qi will circulate smoothly and body movement becomes more agile.

An example may be found within the *Baguazhang* movement called "Pointing to Heaven and Plunging into Earth (*zhitianchadi* 指天插地)." During practice, it requires practitioners to twist their waists

to the center of the circle. The upper arm rises as high as possible while internally rotated so the finger turns inward and points upward. The plunging arm rests closely to the outer thigh. Energy reaches to the fingertips while assuming this sitting posture. Such exercises can be fully extended so the body is twisted to achieve maximum *jīn* stretching and changing.

Moreover, *Baguazhang* differs from other Kung Fu styles by its circular walking. Walking laps has special benefit to human health. Another Chinese saying goes, "Tree blight dries the roots first; aging starts from old legs (+pinyin+ +Chinese+)." The decline of human legs with age is a natural phenomenon. *Baguazhang* stresses that "Walking is the ancestor of practicing a hundred times (*zuo wei bai lian zhi zu* 走为百练之祖)" and "One hundred practices are not as good as one walk (*bai lian bu ru yi zou* 百练不如一走)." *Baguazhang's* mud-wading steps require the upper body to maintain an upright posture while both legs are bent and the feet remain flat on the earth. The body maintains balance just as if walking in the mud. This significantly increases the load on the leg movements. It is good for improving leg strength and the flexibility of joints and muscles. It also promotes blood circulation in the lower limbs significantly.

*Baguazhang* uses swinging hooking steps to change the direction and posture. These steps require that the practitioner's ankles, knees and hips be very flexible and agile.



Pointing to Heaven and Plunging into Earth 指天插地

Practice over a long period of time will increase the agility of the joints. From the health and wellness perspective, *Baguazhang* practice improves body mechanics and helps prevent falls. According to TCM theory, it can also slow aging and strengthen the immune system to fight against disease.

### Swinging hooking steps



## Will it Work in the Streets?

Combat ability is the main reason why Kung Fu differs from other exercises. Every Kung Fu style has



## Wind Wheel Chop 风轮劈掌



### Application



its own characteristics for performance and combat techniques. *Baguazhang* is an internal system whose main characteristics are “changing” and “walking” – changing palms and walking and turning in circles. The *Baguazhang* practitioner constantly changes the distance between himself and the opponent to avoid a frontal attack. *Baguazhang* fighters attack obliquely, waiting for an opportunity to strike. They deploy palm strikes over fists and capitalize on the flexible features of hooking.

An example can be found within the “Advantage Taking” palm technique (*shunshizhang* 顺势掌).

When an opponent strikes from behind, the *Baguazhang* fighter locks the left foot, turns the body backwards, takes a *baibu* spinning step with the right foot to lock the opponent’s right heel, and uses the right palm to chop or grab the opponent’s left arm. The left palm simultaneously chops downward to the opponent’s head or neck, or could alternately be used to apply a joint lock. ☺

Meng Tao is an Associate Professor at the Capital University of Physical Education and Sports. She holds a PhD in Wushu and is ranked 7th *duan* by the Chinese Wushu Association. She is also the Vice Chairperson for the Global Chinese Instructional Wushu Training and Development program.



**Every Kung Fu style has its own Characteristics for performance and combat techniques.**