

FUJIAN BAI HE QUAN FORMS - CHOREOGRAPHY, SUBSTANCE AND FUNCTION

BY PAUL FRETTER, NOVEMBER 2011

The Forms are the learning framework of our White Crane System, which must be studied and cultivated by the student. Their role is central to the development of skill in our system, and their study and practice occupy perhaps seventy per cent of one's weekly training regime. First we must grasp the choreography and cultivate the accuracy of movement, before we can then put the *principles* into the movements of the Forms to create the *substance*, and what comes out will be the *function*. The word *quan* (fist) signifies an internal art, and it is by applying the principles into the framework (Forms), that we can transition from the normal habit of externally (un)coordinated movement to a new habit of using a synchronised internal movement to create the correct external movement.

THE SEQUENCE OF MOVEMENTS (CHOREOGRAPHY)

When first learning a form, your attention and dominant thoughts are necessarily on reproducing the sequence of positions and movements; the 'choreography'. The other aspects of the 'performance' will be left to operate according to current habit, either trained or otherwise. At this stage only the rough movement is taught, such that the student knows approximately where to step and how to move the limbs in relation to one another. The main qualities the student will be encouraged to maintain are to be upright (centre of equilibrium) and relaxed.

It is not always necessary that the entire form is taught at this stage, and each form is divided into sections for teaching purposes.

THE ACCURACY OF MOVEMENT

Accuracy should be taught once the basic sequence of movements of either a section or an entire form can be performed continuously and without hesitation. Accuracy of movement is concerned with what to move and where to move it to, and is taught in two parts:

Accuracy of position. This describes the precise positioning of the body, each limb and the major joints at the completion of each movement (posture). The measurements are taken from the individual's own body shape, and are not described using a rule or scale.

Accuracy of transition. This describes the timing and trajectory of moving each part of the body, relative to the other parts, between one position and the next.

At this level, the accuracy is created 'externally', where the joints are positioned by adjusting according to how they are seen from the outside. To cultivate accuracy it is best to take one movement out of the Form and repeat it slowly, over and over many times, whilst mindfully

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adjusting and correcting. Then repeat the process with a different movement from the Form. Over time the body will have the habit to move and position itself accurately within each of the movements you have practiced. There will be a knock-on effect to other movements and you will find that it becomes easier to achieve accuracy with them.

At this level of practice it can therefore be seen, that the attention and dominant thought (mindfulness) must be free to operate and focus on the accuracy and not be hindered by trying to remember the choreography.

To complement the Forms practice I teach partner drills (martial applications) for specific movements, to allow the student to experience fundamental ideas such as not blocking the flow of the other person's force. Because the student's form will at this stage be an external practice, the nature of these drills is largely external at this level.

CULTIVATING THE SUBSTANCE

Upright, centred, balanced, free of unnecessary tension. Floating, sinking, swallowing, spitting. Move from the base. These are just some of the principles on which our system is founded and, one at a time, they must be mindfully applied into the movements in order to gradually cultivate the substance. We could therefore describe the substance as being the tangible and practical manifestation of the principles in the body.

After some time training mindfully at this level, the movement and the accuracy begin to be created 'internally', where the joints are positioned by adjusting according to how the body is felt from the inside. Notice the shift in emphasis from "looking from the outside" to "feeling from the inside". This is part of the transition from external art to internal art.

When practicing the partner drills the student can now begin to experience the same feelings of substance they have trained in the form. The drills provide an environment for the student to gauge their ability to experience and understand the principles, and highlight what they need to work on in the form. Returning to the form, the student will refine these aspects and soon enough can again try out the partner drills and gauge the results. This cycling between forms and partner work is essential for improving and refining one's understanding and movement.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE FUNCTION

Gradually one's understanding of the principles, and ability to demonstrate them, will evolve and become manifest not only in the Forms, but also in the partner drills. The sinking will produce consistent grounding, the spitting will produce a clear and powerful intention, then springing and lifting will break the partner's base and the bursting and rebounding will send them flying. The function (purpose) of the substance has then become real and functionally manifested in exercises, forms and partner work.

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