

Preserving Taijiquan Characters

In 2020, Taijiquan was designated by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.¹ It behooves us as taijiquan players to help preserve the classic Chinese literature of the art. One area that needs our attention is the digitization of materials printed before the advent of modern computer character encoding and fonts.

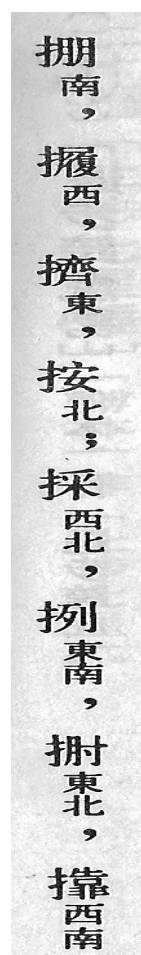
The problem, as I see it, is that some Chinese characters used in older taijiquan texts are not available for use in modern digital fonts. Available substitutes are used.

For example, the graphic at right shows the Eight Energies characters as depicted in an excerpt from the book “A Guide to Taijiquan”². Here I will use these characters to illustrate the problem, but there may be many more such characters which should be included when considering the scope of this question.

To me, there is a visual consistency in these characters taken as a whole that is missing when only available modern characters are used, in particular, the presence of the hand radical (扌) in each these traditional characters. In addition, I think it may be important from an historical perspective to preserve these characters and their usage. That is, a closer connection to the original can be maintained.

There are three aspects to the problem of these missing characters:

1. Some characters do not have code points in the Unicode database. For example, 掇, 捌, 攥.³



¹ See UNESCO website: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/taijiquan-00424>

² 太极拳谱, 人民体育出版社, 1991 & 2000, ISBN 7-5009-0684-6/G654

³ About the Unicode database: <https://unicode.org/ucd/>

2. Some characters have Unicode entries but are not widely implemented in modern digital fonts. For example, 捌
3. Some characters are available, but not searchable by pinyin in Chinese computer input methods. For example, 棚.

Is it possible to preserve Chinese characters as they appeared in early taiji and other martial arts texts by making them available in modern digital fonts? I think so if at least two aspects of the problem are addressed.

1. Taken together, the number of missing characters in this category (taiji/martial arts) is relatively small and would not require much space in the Unicode database. As with other categories, such as the set of Yi Jing hexagram characters, a place could be found for these supplemental characters.
2. With codepoints in Unicode, font developers will be able to add glyphs for the characters under consideration. Indeed, even amateurs like myself, will then be able to modify their favorite fonts to include these characters as I have done with several in this article.
3. With (1) and (2) done, there would be a basis for developers of character lookup software and dictionaries to include these characters in their products.

Characters to preserve in modern fonts. ⁴	Most often seen in digital use	Desired character available in most digital fonts	Missing from Unicode, hence from any digital font	Has code point but glyph not available in most digital fonts	Needs pinyin and definition for dictionary look-ups
棚	棚	x			péng
攬	捋		x		lǚ
擠 ⁵	挤	x			
按	按	x			
採	采	x			
捌	列			x	
肘	肘		x		zhǒu
攢	靠		x		kào

If you have ideas or opinions about this subject, please feel free to contact me.

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4 Some of the characters in this column were created by hand using software tools available in Linux : 攬, 捋, 攢.

5 The use of simplified vs traditional characters is not part of this analysis.