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'SOFT' AKA SECOND INTENTION OFFENCE?

THE CONCEPT OF 'HARD' AND 'SOFT' IN THE FENCING THEORY OF THE MING DYNASTY FENCING TREATISE, JIAN JING

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ABSTRACT

The 16th century Chinese fight book *Jian Jing* 劍經 (Sword Treatise), written by the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) general Yu Dayou 俞大猷, is the oldest available comprehensive work on Chinese fencing theory. This paper argues that the treatise uses the terms *gang* 剛 (hard) and *rou* 柔 (soft) as technical terms to label tactics what are known as first and second intention offence in modern sport fencing. The terms hard and soft became widely used from the late 17th century onward by practitioners of the so-called 'internal schools'. Since then the terms hard and soft have remained part of Chinese martial arts vocabulary. However, this use of this pair of terms in the field of military culture goes further back, to the military classics of ancient China. This paper presents a few examples of how ancient Chinese military culture included these terms in its specialised vocabulary, and argues that these words are used as technical terms of martial vocabulary in Ming dynasty fight books, and imply neither a Daoist philosophical background nor a direct Daoist influence on the documented martial arts. It then discusses the key concepts of Yu's fencing theory, including how his system propagates second intention offence instead of first intention actions, and how the terms 'soft' and 'hard' may label these two tactical approaches in his treatise.

INTRODUCTION

The 16th century Chinese fight book¹ *Jian Jing* 劍經 (Sword Treatise) uses the terms hard (*gang* 剛) and soft (*rou* 柔) to label technical terms of fencing theory. Hard and soft are also well-known terms among contemporary practitioners, researchers and scholars of Chinese martial arts. They are used to classify martial arts styles and systems based on their attitude towards the application of physical force and self-cultivation practices. According to popular definition,² soft styles – often referred to as ‘internal styles’ or ‘internal schools’ (*neijia* 內家) – favour longevity practices and the cultivation of the mind, which, as practitioners claim, can lead to martial prowess. Hard styles or ‘external styles’ (*waijia* 外家) primarily rely on the strength and speed of the body. Practitioners of external schools train to develop physical abilities to become more effective fighters. Another popular contemporary way to explain the difference between hard and soft martial arts is to describe hard styles as the ones that apply strength and soft styles as those that use the strength of the enemy against them [Wilson 2017], however this interpretation exceeds the scope of Chinese martial arts culture.

Such categorisations of Chinese martial arts usually draw upon some sort of unspoken philosophical assumptions. Modern Chinese martial arts practices often include self-cultivation and spiritual aspects [LaRochelle 2013: 2] that rely on the teachings of Daoist and Buddhist philosophy. However, based on the research of Stanley Henning [1994] Peter Lorge [2012], Dominic LaRochelle [2013], and other scholars, there seems to be a consensus among experts of the field that the Daoist origin of internal Chinese martial arts is a somewhat modern myth, which had been created in the 17th century and became widespread during the 19th [Bowman 2012: 18] and 20th century. The claims about the Buddhist origins of Chinese martial arts also mostly fall into the legend category, and were invented after the 17th century [Shahar 2008].

Considering these findings, if we do look for philosophical or religious content in *Jian Jing*, but try to understand the meaning of hard and soft as terms of fencing theory, we see that these words most likely label tactical approaches that can be found in several fencing systems from different places and ages around the world. These approaches are called first and second intention offence in modern Olympic sport fencing. First intention tactic means starting the fight with a direct, committed attack to hit our target with our first action. In second intention tactic “a fencer executes a convincing, yet false, action in hopes of drawing a true, committed reaction from their opponent.” [USA Fencing 2022] As we will see through quotations from the source, Yu’s fencing system highly relies on the latter, and bases its whole theoretical focus on the time and timing aspect of fighting. Also, understanding hard and soft as names of tactical approaches help us to understand other seemingly obscure terms in Yu’s treatise, leading to a better understanding of the whole theoretical background of his martial art.

English translations of Chinese texts in this paper, if not indicated otherwise, are made by the author.

THE TERMS HARD AND SOFT IN CHINESE MILITARY CULTURE

The words hard and soft as specialised terms in a written work of a field of culture first appear in the essential classical text of Daoism, the *Daodejing* 道德經. The well-known passage from the 78th Chapter reads: ‘The soft overcomes the hard, the weak overcomes the strong’ [Legge 1891]. These terms were also introduced to Chinese military literature as early as between the 6th and 3rd century BCE in *The Art of War* (*Sunzi Bingfa* 孫子兵法) [Sawyer 1993: 276]. We also find several occurrences of hard and soft in other classics of the Chinese military canon. The *Wuzi’s Art of War* (*Wuzi* 吳子) [Sawyer 1993: 323] and *The Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* (*Huang Shigong San Lue* 黃石公三略) [Sawyer 1993: 423; 424] both use these terms to label different thoughts and concepts, but in different contexts from work to work [Sawyer 1993; Ringo 2001]. What is important, though, from the aspect of hard and soft’s occurrence in Ming martial arts manuals is these terms had been already used in military works of the past, and were well-known in Chinese military culture, even if their meaning changed through contexts and ages.

In the later period of the Ming rule in the 16th century we see hard and soft becoming parts of Chinese martial arts terminology for the first time in the fencing system of *Jian Jing*. *Jian Jing* is a fencing manual that contains a complete and comprehensive weapon-based martial arts system. This work is unique among other Ming fight books in the sense that it is not only a collection of techniques and instructions like most of its contemporary counterparts, but includes descriptions of theoretical concepts about fencing.

JIAN JING AND MING DYNASTY FIGHT BOOK TRADITION

Jian Jing was written by Yu Dayou 俞大猷, a Ming general who gained fame by fighting the infamous *wokou* 倭寇 pirates. The treatise has been preserved in the military manual *Xu Wujing Zongyao* 續武經總要 (*Continuation of the Complete Essentials for the Military Classics*) [Yu & Zhao 1557] authored by Zhao Benxue 趙本學, a scholar from Fujian who mentored Yu. Yu wrote the last chapter of the eight-volume work, which contains *Jian Jing*.³ The famous Ming general Qi Jiguang also compiled Yu’s fencing treatise into his military encyclopaedia, the *Jixiao Xinshu* 紀效新書 (*On Military Preparation*) [Qi 1782], published in 1580. *Jian Jing* was included in the chapter⁴ discussing close-quarters combat. Despite the word ‘sword’ in its title, *Jian Jing* teaches mostly staff fighting techniques. Yu claims that long staff fighting is the basis of all weapon-based combat, and everything learnt with it can be applied

1 The term *fight book* was originally created for the field of historical European martial arts research [Jaquet, Verelst and Dawson 2016] but it also suits Chinese works of the same genre.

2 This kind of division of Chinese martial arts into soft and hard schools, and their definition, was first laid down in the *Epitaph of Wang Zhengnan* (Wang Zhengnan Muzhiming 王征南墓志銘) by Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695) in 1669. For more information about the relevance of this source see [Lorge 2012: 192].

3 There is a popular misconception that the *Jian Jing* was originally a chapter of a larger work of Yu Dayou entitled *Compilation of Vital Energy* (*Zhengqi Tang Ji* 正氣堂集). In fact, the *Compilation of Vital Energy* was created after the death of Yu Dayou from all of his collected literary works including treatises, letters, and poetry. The title was also given by the editors of the compilation.

4 Chapter 12. About the Long Use of Short Weapons (Duan bing chang yong shuo 短兵長用說) (Qi 1782: 12ch).

to sword and polearm fencing. The treatise consists of mnemonic verses about basic body posture and fencing theory, a trident solo drill and detailed descriptions of fencing plays arranged into 154 paragraphs. *Jian Jing* is considered a prominent work of the Chinese fight book tradition and has been a reference point for the practitioners of Chinese martial arts in the last three centuries up to the present day.

According to our current knowledge, there are no surviving comprehensive Chinese martial arts manuals written before the 16th century. Although we have mentions of now lost martial arts sources in earlier catalogues, it seems that the fashion of writing fight books did not exist in China before the late period of the Ming dynasty. For a list of Ming dynasty martial arts authors and sources, see [Li 2018: 52–74]. The appearance of this new genre was in accordance with a larger scale of cultural changes. With the radically growing Ming population, the amount of educated, literate people has also increased. This created a larger demand for books in general [Wang 2003: 18]. In the 14th and 15th century, it became a custom for professionals of different fields to write treatises and books to present and document their knowledge. This tendency has shortly appeared in the field of military and martial arts as well.⁵ Military officers started to write manuals and encyclopaedias encompassing all the knowledge they considered important in their field of profession, including martial arts systems [Lorge 2012: 159]. The early Chinese fight books were created as parts of chapters in military encyclopaedias dealing with the training of soldiers.

The military context of these fight books really shows itself in the pragmatism the authors treated martial arts with. Martial arts systems recorded in the military encyclopaedias are mostly compilations of techniques collected from several different traditions. The intention of the authors was to put together simple and effective systems which suit the military application. It is very similar to how Krav Maga was compiled from techniques of several martial arts to meet the needs of modern military combatives and self-defence [Schaflechner 2021: 111–12].

We do not know if civilian martial arts practice of the Ming era had any philosophical, religious, or esoteric elements similar to the ones we usually find in modern martial arts culture. Ming dynasty fight books written by military professionals do not have such content, which might be the result of their pragmatic military approach.⁶ We also have a few Ming fight books by authors who were not professional soldiers, therefore the martial arts recorded by them are conventionally categorised ‘civilian’ [Li 2018: 65]. The most well-known works of this category are Cheng Zongyou’s 程宗猷 *Gengyu Shengji* 耕餘剩技 (*Skills Beyond Farming*) [Cheng 1621] and Wu Shu’s 吳叟 *Shoubi lu* 手臂錄 (Record

of Arms) [Ren 2016].⁷ Both works are compilations of fighting systems with various weapons, such as lances, polearms and two-handed swords of Japanese influence [Cheng 1621: 68b]. These works, in their layout and style, are very similar to fight books written for the military. They seemingly followed the already established publication standards of the era [Wang 2003: 5]. This similarity is also true for their content: they only contain technical information of martial arts. Even Cheng’s fight book documenting Shaolin staff fighting does not have any religious or philosophical material. Therefore, in light of available data, we can cautiously suppose that Chinese martial arts were not as interwoven with philosophical and religious content as we know them today. However, we have a very small corpus of martial arts sources from the era, so it is not unlikely that there have been Ming schools or folk martial arts communities with a stronger emphasis on religious or esoteric elements that we do not know of. However, available Ming fight books only discuss the technical aspects of martial arts, making them very similar to most late medieval and early modern European fight books.

HARD AND SOFT IN MING DYNASTY MILITARY FENCING TERMINOLOGY

The terms hard and soft can be found in the mnemonic verses section of *Jian Jing* as terms that are parts of a basic tactical doctrine: ‘[Be] hard before the force of the opponent, [but] softly take advantage of his passed force’⁸ [Yu 1782]. We do not know exactly when Chinese martial artists started to use this pair of terms to name concepts of their art, but this is the first time we can find them in the vocabulary of a Chinese fight book. It is possible that Yu Dayou was the first one to use hard and soft in martial arts teachings, but according to the long history of the term in Chinese military culture, it is likely that their usage had been in vogue for some time among martial artists. It is possible that the quoted doctrine had been well-known among fighters of the period, spreading orally from master to pupil, and Yu was merely the first one to write it down.

The manner how *Jian Jing* uses hard and soft to name concepts of a specialised field, in this case fencing theory, is not unique. It tries to draw upon the common cultural embeddedness and familiarity of these words to label otherwise complex terms of theory. As Guy Windsor defined the meaning of fencing theory: ‘[it] is the intellectual, abstract structure that fencers use to describe, define, and explain their art’ [Windsor 2018: 37]. As simple as it sounds, in reality it is quite challenging to find the correct words to describe the theory behind the mechanics and the tactical mindset of a martial arts system. It is a clever practice to choose terms descriptive enough that they are easily memorisable and

5 The Song dynasty (960–1279) military compendium *Wujing Zongyao* 武經總要 (Complete Essentials for the Military Classics) preceded Ming military encyclopaedias, the genre, however, has not become popular and widespread before the second part of the Ming rule. The Song compendium does not contain fighting manuals or fencing treatises, this is a feature that only seems to appear in Ming books of the genre.

6 It tells a lot about the pragmatic nature of pre-Qing Chinese martial arts culture that the most important measure of martial prowess was sheer physical strength [Lorge 2012].

7 Ren’s book contains Wu’s original text and a detailed, contemporary interpretation of his treatise in Chinese.

8 剛在他力前，柔乘他力後。

do not need a lot of additional explanation from the instructor. Because of the limitations of the written medium,⁹ finding the right terms that invoke the right connotations in the audience is especially important when writing a fight book. Martial arts masters from different times and places all had to face this same problem, and they often came up with similar solutions. They borrowed terms with a similar meaning or connotation from other, commonly known fields of culture to name their abstract theoretical concepts.

This is the same logic behind the choice of the terms *vor*, *nach*, *indes* in the medieval German fencing tradition of Johannes Liechtenauer [Anonymous 1389]. The three simple words of everyday language basically mean *before*, *after* and *meanwhile*,¹⁰ but they cover complex concepts about the timing of techniques relative to the opponent’s actions. Salvator Fabris did the same when he borrowed the term *tempo* from Aristotle and used it to name the amount of time in which one movement can be done in fencing [Rutherford 2018]. The well-educated renaissance gentleman – the aimed audience of Fabris – was familiar with the philosophical concepts of Aristotle, therefore had no problem understanding the author’s intentions.

In the choice of using hard and soft as terms of fencing theory, the same logic can be observed. Neo-Confucianism, the prominent ideology of the Ming literati [Bol 2003: 242], has already incorporated several canonical Taoist texts during the Song dynasty (960–1279), and syncretised their concepts into its own philosophical system [Levine 2009: 611]. As the *Daodejing* was one of these incorporated works, it is a logical assumption that the concepts of hard and soft have also become parts of Ming literary culture through Neo-Confucianism, and were familiar terms for the educated gentlemen of the period. As described above, these two terms have also been part of the Chinese military vocabulary since antiquity. To become an officer in the Ming military a candidate had to pass military exams. On these exams, among others, a thorough knowledge of the Chinese Military Classics was expected [Mote and Twitchett 2008]. Candidates were also required to be well-versed in the Neo-Confucian ideology and literature [Miyazaki 1981]. Hence, we can safely suppose that the average officer of the era knew and used the terms hard and soft as parts of both the literary and military vocabulary. Therefore, professional soldiers, the primary audience of the fight books, could be familiar with these concepts.

On the other hand, the choice of words – together with the versified form – also perfectly suited the task of training common soldiers with easily memorisable oral instructions. Hard and soft, as simple words of everyday language, were easy to understand and memorise. As abstract

Daoist concepts, they were also deeply embedded in common culture [Ownby 2003: 226; Berling 1998: 986], so the everyday person supposedly could have no problem associating these words with something complex that cannot be described with a few simple words. Despite Neo-Confucianism being the favoured ideology of the Ming literati, Daoist religion enjoyed the support of several Ming emperors [Taylor 1998: 878], who carefully tried to maintain the balance of power among the three prominent ideology of the era: Neo-Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Taoism also had strong roots in local communities. Taoist temples often enjoyed the support of local leaders and common lay believers alike [Berling 1998: 959]. Simply put: Taoist culture was part of the everyday life during the Ming. Furthermore, as LaRochelle argues, ‘Chinese cosmology generally encompasses all aspects of Chinese life, from birth to death and beyond. It is thus not surprising that martial arts practitioners rely on those concepts to make sense of their practice’ [LaRochelle 2013]. For example, if common soldiers heard the term soft from their training officer in a martial arts training context, it invoked cultural connotations from a common culture in them. They could be familiar with the word, which therefore was not an abstract and somewhat elitist theoretical term for them. Considering all of the above, the choice of hard and soft to describe fencing theoretical concepts equally suited the well-educated and the common audience, the literati, the military officials and the simple soldiers alike.

The borrowing of terms from other fields to fencing theory was also not restricted to philosophy. *Jian Jing* uses the word *paiwei* 拍位, which is originally a term of music theory meaning the place of the beat in a song’s rhythm. Yu adopted this word to name another important theoretical fencing concept that I discuss in more detail in the following section.

SOFT AKA SECOND INTENTION OFFENSE

If we accept that *Jian Jing* uses hard and soft as terms of fencing theory and not as terms of Daoist (or any kind of) philosophy, let us have a look at what specific concepts can they refer to. The text reads as the following:

[Be] hard before the force of the opponent, [but] softly take advantage of his passed force. When he is busy, I am waiting calmly, the gentleman fights with the knowledge of the *paiwei*.¹¹ [Yu 1782]

I propose an interpretation¹² where ‘hard’ in this quote means that we

9 For more information about the limitations of knowledge transfer in fight books, see [Bauer 2016; Kleinau 2016].

10 For a detailed glossary of HEMA fencing terminology, see [The Association for Renaissance Martial Arts 2020]

11 剛在他力前，柔乘他力後。彼忙我靜待，知拍任君鬥。

12 In case of lost martial arts that have no continuous, living tradition we can never be absolutely sure about the meaning of special theoretical terms [Burkart 2016]. This is a problem most familiar for researchers of HEMA, but present in the research of any extinct martial arts. I consider Yu’s fencing system a lost art, similarly to premodern European martial arts. Because of the huge changes in Chinese martial arts culture during and after the Qing dynasty, there is no direct continuity between martial arts of the Ming era and today. Therefore, my interpretation here is based on the thorough study of the written source alone, and does not deal with contemporary martial arts styles’ interpretations of hard and soft.

take the initiative and start the action against our opponent. In this case, we must be as direct as possible and threaten them with our every movement to make hit. ‘Soft’ is the opposite of this approach. It is when we wait for or provoke the enemy’s attack, and then we react to it, taking advantage of the openings they created with their action. Starting an attack as a provocation, with the intention to force a reaction from the opponent and establishing an advantageous situation, but not aiming for a direct hit also falls into this latter category. These readings concur with the modern fencing concepts first and second intention offence.

There can be another reading of this quote, which at first glance seems more obvious, and more in line with contemporary interpretations of these terms [Wilson 2017]. The hard and the soft approach can both be understood as a type of defensive action against the enemy’s offense. According to this way of thinking, hard means a decisive and firm parry against the attack, while a soft defence is a way of diverting the attack away from us without directly opposing it with similar force. I argue, however, that hard and soft, at least in the fencing theory of *Jian Jing*, have much more to do with the time and timing aspect of tactical thinking rather than with the strength and method of parrying.

First, *qian* 前 and *hou* 後 in this passage in my understanding stand for *before* and *after*. If we try to interpret their meaning regarding parries, *after* might make sense, as a parry should logically come following the enemy’s attack, but there is no way I can make an effective parry *before* they attack me, as in this case, my intended parry simply becomes an empty movement that does not react to or obstruct any attack. *Qian* and *hou*, these two characters can also have the meanings ‘in front of’ and ‘behind’. In this case, our problem with the parry-based interpretation again will be that while ‘in front of’ makes sense regarding parries, as my weapon is in front of the enemy’s weapon and blocks its way, but putting my parry behind their weapon will not protect me, and in the best case results in a double hit, which is not acceptable in a self-defence or combative fighting situation.

If we interpret *qian* and *hou* in the context of primary and second intention fencing, however, the time-based meanings of these words start to make sense. With a first intention (or hard) tactic I start my committed offense *before* the enemy’s any offensive action, before they could use their weapon to effectively hit me (their ‘strength’). With a second intention (or soft) tactic I first open up their defence with a provocation, an intended opening or an uncommitted strike, to establish a situation where I take advantage of their attack, *after* they launched it. This is how hard and soft can be technical terms labelling timing-based tactical approaches.

Second, understanding what term *li* 力 means in the text helps us a lot in our effort to decipher the meaning of hard and soft as technical

terms. The word *li* basically means strength, and we can definitely find passages in *Jian Jing* where this word is used in its everyday meaning, for example, to discuss the role of the arms’ strength in blows, as in the 115th passage for example [Yu 1782].¹³ Let us look, however, at other passages, where *Jian Jing* uses *li* with an obviously different meaning:

He strikes downwards, I make a rising backhand cover, [then] I trick him into believing I make a downward blow, but in reality I do not strike, but wait for him to make a heavily committed upwards backhand cover, causing his strength (*li*) to pass, then I bind his staff and shave down.¹⁴ [Yu 1782]

This passage instructs the reader to make a feint in order to provoke a heavily committed reaction from the enemy. By making this empty covering blow, basically hitting the air, his *li* passes, as in that exact moment, the enemy loses his ability to hurt us, or to effectively cover our next action. His empty blow at that moment has already lost its momentum, and he cannot instantly make another action, nor has a strong structure yet to parry our next action – contacting and pushing down his weapon. Another passage basically repeats the same principle, but in a more general scope, without mentioning specific actions:

Wait for (the moment) when his old strength has already (*li*) passed, but his new strength has not been launched, then take advantage of that.¹⁵ [Yu 1782]

By analysing the previous two passages, discussing basically the same theoretical principle, one in a specific scenario, the other in a more general manner, we can infer that *li* here probably is not equal with the simple and literal meaning of strength. More likely it is a temporary quality of an enemy’s action, meaning its ability to have an effect in the fight. A blow, which has not been launched or a blow that is already on its way to its target has *li*, has potential to hurt the enemy or to make an effective cover. A blow, which has already reached its aim, has no momentum, nor the probability to be launched, so it has no *li*. Thus we can interpret the term *li* as a window of movement and time in an action, where the action is effective and has potential, momentum, strength or structure behind it. The importance of taking advantage of the enemy’s passed *li* is so fundamental to Yu’s fencing system, that he repeats this principle at several places around the treatise. He also states that the whole book’s essence can be summarised in this short principle:

The whole book can be summed up in these mere eight characters: take advantage of the moment when his old strength (*li*) has already passed, but his new strength has not been launched. So excellent, so excellent!¹⁶ [Yu 1782]

13 今之欲用力打人者，惟恐棍提起不高、打不重，蓋隻是有前手之力，無後手之功故耳！

14 他打下，我揭起，我哄他欲打下而實不打下，待他盡力揭起，力使過了，即趕他棍剃下。

15 待他舊力略過，新力未發，然後乘之，所以順人之勢、借人之力也。

16 全書總要，隻乘他舊力略過，新力未發八字耳。至妙至妙！

Waiting for and taking advantage of an enemy’s ineffective action or a disadvantageous position that has been established through our provocations is a key element of second intention offence. We can see that Yu considers this principle crucial for his fencing theory, and I hope I could convince the reader through the above argument, that *Jian Jing* labels this principle with the term soft. Therefore I argue that the soft approach and the second intention tactic described in the previous quotes mean the same fencing theoretical concept.

Third, as I will demonstrate it with several examples taken both from *Jian Jing* and other period fencing treatises below, Ming dynasty fight books dealing with sword fencing or general principles of fighting with short arms,¹⁷ put much more emphasis on the time aspect of fighting, than any other important elements of fencing theory. Dealing with the timing of actions relative to the enemy’s actions, using provocations, and the second intention approach are dominant components in the theoretical background of these weapon-based martial arts.

There are other passages in *Jian Jing* that also discuss and take side with the second intention approach. Our original quote about hard and soft continues as: ‘When he is busy, I am waiting calmly’. These few words are also very important as they put the application of the soft approach in a broader context. If we supplement this passage with Yu’s other thoughts about the time aspect of fencing, we get a coherent picture of this fencing system’s perspective of time and timing:

Who hits later achieves victory earlier.¹⁸

You should know this well, you can never injure someone with only one hit [...].¹⁹

Do not [aim to] hit the enemy in the first instance, only hit him in the second instance.²⁰ [Yu 1782]

All these instructions teach us that we should rather wait for the opponent to start the first action in a duel. But even if we take the initiative, we should not aim our first action as a fully committed attack, but as a provocation that creates an opening for our second, third or even fourth blow that will finally hit. This approach describes again the tactical concept which is called second intention offense in modern sport fencing.

Several other Ming dynasty ‘short arm’ fighting systems base the time-aspect of their fencing theory on second intention tactics. Cheng Zongyou’s two-handed *dao* manual, the *Dandao Faxuan* 單刀法選 (Selected techniques of the single dao), included in the *Gengyu Chengji*,

primarily discusses sword techniques against a spearman. Similarly to most Ming fight books, the treatise contains several short sequences of techniques with an illustration showing the initial posture for each, and calls these *shi* 勢 (meaning both the stance and the corresponding sequence). The third among these sequences, which Cheng calls ‘Head covering stance’²¹ gives instructions for a typical second intention offensive sequence:

In this [stance] open up the left side door / So the left side of the body is towards the enemy / to provoke him to come and stab with the spear / Horizontally block and open the spear with the dao / Then take a diagonal advancing step with the right foot / Put back the left hand on the grip to hold it with both hands / Then strike to death as you please.²² [Cheng 1621: 71b]

As we can see, Cheng clearly instructs the swordsman to intentionally make an opening as a provocation, and then to take advantage of the spearman’s attack into this opening. Due to the scope of a journal article I will not quote every stance from Cheng’s treatise, merely point out,²³ that the majority of these *shi* play out following the same principles that we see in the above quote: make an opening as a provocation, wait for the attack, and take advantage of it [Cheng 1621: 72–79]. The whole fencing system is dominantly based on second intention tactics, although Cheng does not use any of the related terms we find in *Jian Jing* for this. We see basically the same approach to time-based tactics in another *dandao* treatise, the respective chapter of the *Shoubilu* [Ren 2016: 261–292], and there are also similar provocations in the *dao* and shield treatise found in the 11th chapter of the *Jixiao Xinshu* [Qi 1782: 11ch 4a–8b]: ‘Diagonal stepping stance – this is for an incoming horizontal strike. The method of receiving it is stepping diagonally’²⁴ [Qi 1782: 11ch 4b]. And while we do not find mentions of the terms hard and soft in any other Ming dynasty fight book apart from *Jian Jing*, the tactical approach labelled soft in the latter seems to be a very widespread phenomenon in surviving Ming fencing manuals. It is clear that this concept is not limited to the fencing theory that Yu wrote down.

PAIWEI IN BETWEEN

Moving back to *Jian Jing* we find an important concept that does not fit perfectly into the second intention approach. The last thought of our original quoted passage, ‘the gentleman fights with the knowledge of

21 埋頭刀勢

22 埋頭刀勢/此開左邊門戶 / 將左邊身體向敵/餌彼鎗割入 / 以刀橫攔開鎗/斜進右腳 / 換左手共持把 / 聽便砍殺

23 The information regarding the content of the *Dandao Faxuan* is based on an unpublished translation and analysis of the treatise which is part of my ongoing doctoral research.

24 斜行勢 此乃道來橫 受之法動偏

17 The *Jixiao Xinshu* – presumably following period categorization, as these two categories also appear in several other Ming military treatises – puts different weapons into two groups: long arms (*chang bing* 長兵) and short arms (*duan bing* 短兵). Everything shorter than a spear, including polearms, falls into the short arms category.

18 後發勝先實。

19 知此，決不可一發便要傷人 [...].

20 不打他先一下，隻打他第二一下。

the *paiwei*’ also draws attention to the importance of timing, but from a different angle. As I already mentioned, this term originally means ‘the place of the beat’ in music, but Yu uses it to describe a time-based theoretical concept that falls between the hard and the soft approach. *Paiwei* is the term for a certain moment during the opponent’s action when it is possible to execute a technique called *dang* 當, which Yu considers the peak of the art of fencing and ‘indescribably wonderful’.²⁵ Yu wrote the following explanations about *paiwei* and *dang* in *Jian Jing*:

This *dang* character is like the place of the beat in songs, it is indescribably wonderful.²⁶ [Yu 1782]
When the *paiwei* is established in the middle, do not pull, shave, cover or [let your weapon] fall²⁷, just throw a thrust, and do it in a really tight manner.²⁸ [Yu 1782]

It seems like Yu here struggles a bit to give an exact explanation of *dang* and *paiwei*, but from the given instructions we can infer that the *dang* is a technique very similar to what the German fencers of the Middle Ages called *Absetzen* – a single, tight movement that is a parry and an attack at the same time. A narrow, straight blow, which intercepts the opponent’s weapon and hits them, all in one action. From here, it is not hard to conclude that the *paiwei* probably means the exact right moment during the opponent’s attack when we can safely carry out this technique. To reach again to medieval German fencing terminology, it is the Chinese equivalent of *indes*.

CONCLUSION

Several Ming dynasty weapon-based martial arts, recorded in fight books, possess complex theoretical backgrounds, which can be analysed and described with the appropriate methodology [Windsor 2018: 39–66; Somogyi 2020]. *Jian Jing* is unique among them as it directly communicates its theoretical principles. In most works, theory is buried in technical instructions and can only be inferred through systematic analysis. In *Jian Jing*, theory is directly told to the reader. Understanding its meaning is still quite the challenge for the modern reader though. We do not possess a large amount of knowledge that was trivial for the original Ming dynasty audience of the work. For a period reader, it was supposedly obvious that, by the terms hard and soft, Yu did not try to include Taoist teachings in his fencing system. For a modern reader, however, due to the large-scale changes in Chinese martial arts culture in the last centuries, and because of the obscurity of a four hundred year-old technical text, this is not trivial. When researching fight books of the past, it is important to leave behind our modern understanding of specific terms, and look at the source with a fresh eye. Martial arts are constantly changing cultural phenomena. What is true for terms of

modern Chinese martial arts culture was not necessarily true hundreds of years ago.

It is also important to try to understand concepts in old fight books through principles and rules that are generally true for every weapon-based system ever created. Laws of physics and human biomechanics are constant. Fencing theory is a tool to describe, understand and take advantage of these laws. Due to cultural and personal diversity, every martial arts system describes these laws differently and takes different approaches to utilise them, but at the core we find these constants that can help us to understand otherwise obscure technical terms. First and second intention tactics might be terms of modern sport fencing, but several historical fencing systems utilised the principles behind them. Yu also understood these principles through experience and labelled them with terms that suited his socio-cultural environment. In the case of Ming dynasty fight books, it is always important to look for technical concepts when the meaning of a term is unclear, for the misinterpretation of theoretical terminology as philosophical content can lead to false results. It is in our best interest to take into account that Chinese martial arts of the past have not necessarily been as interwoven with philosophical and religious elements as they are today.

25 妙不可言。

26 此當字如曲中之拍位，妙不可言。

27 Names of movements with the weapon.

28 中間有拍位，不用拔刺洗落，隻撒手殺，則又緊矣。

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