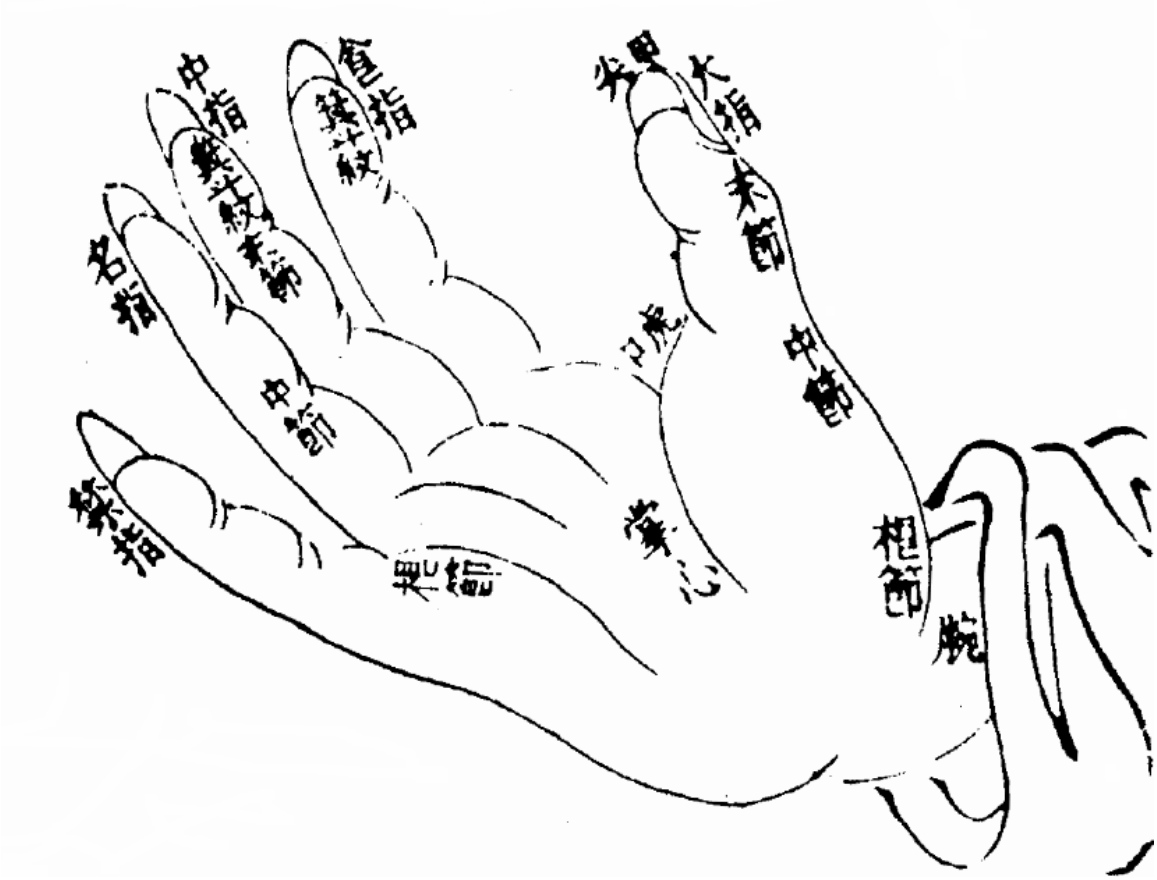
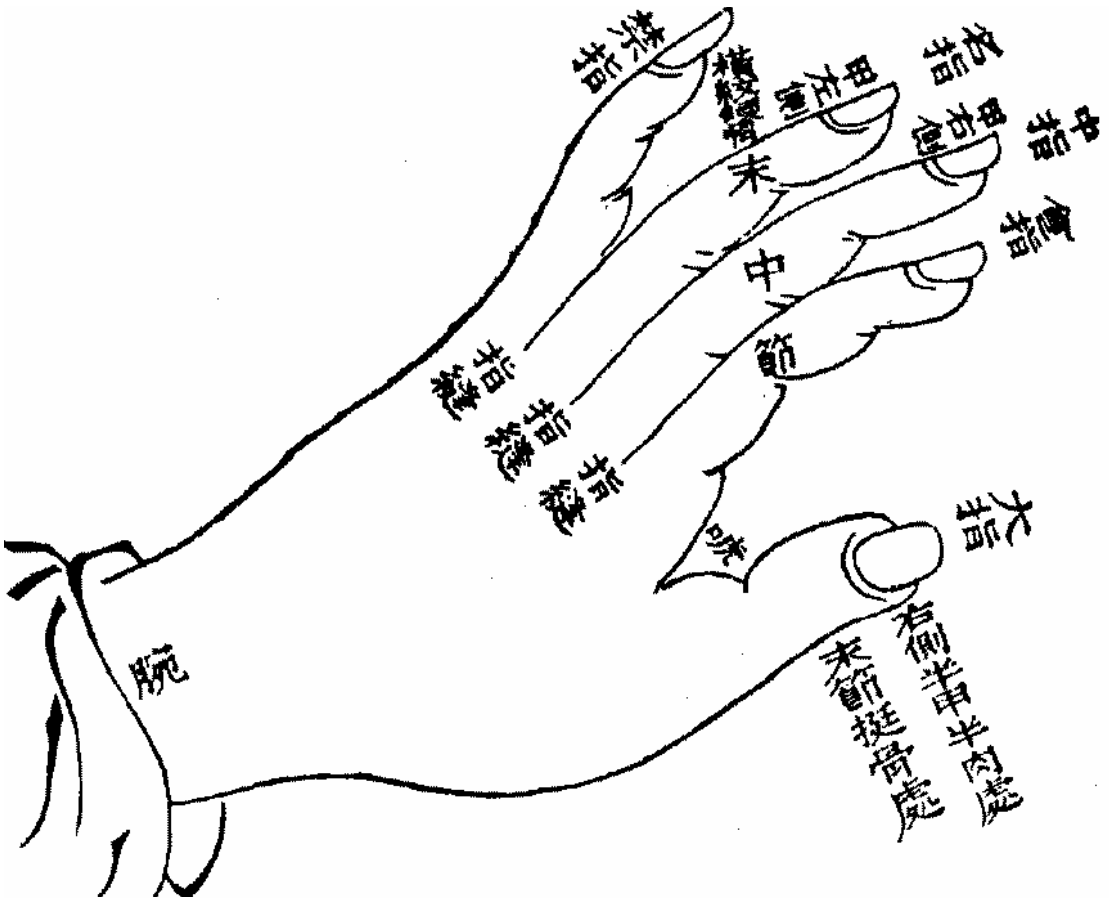
Volume 4, Chapter 7:
Left and Right-Hand Fingering – An Illustrated Explanation



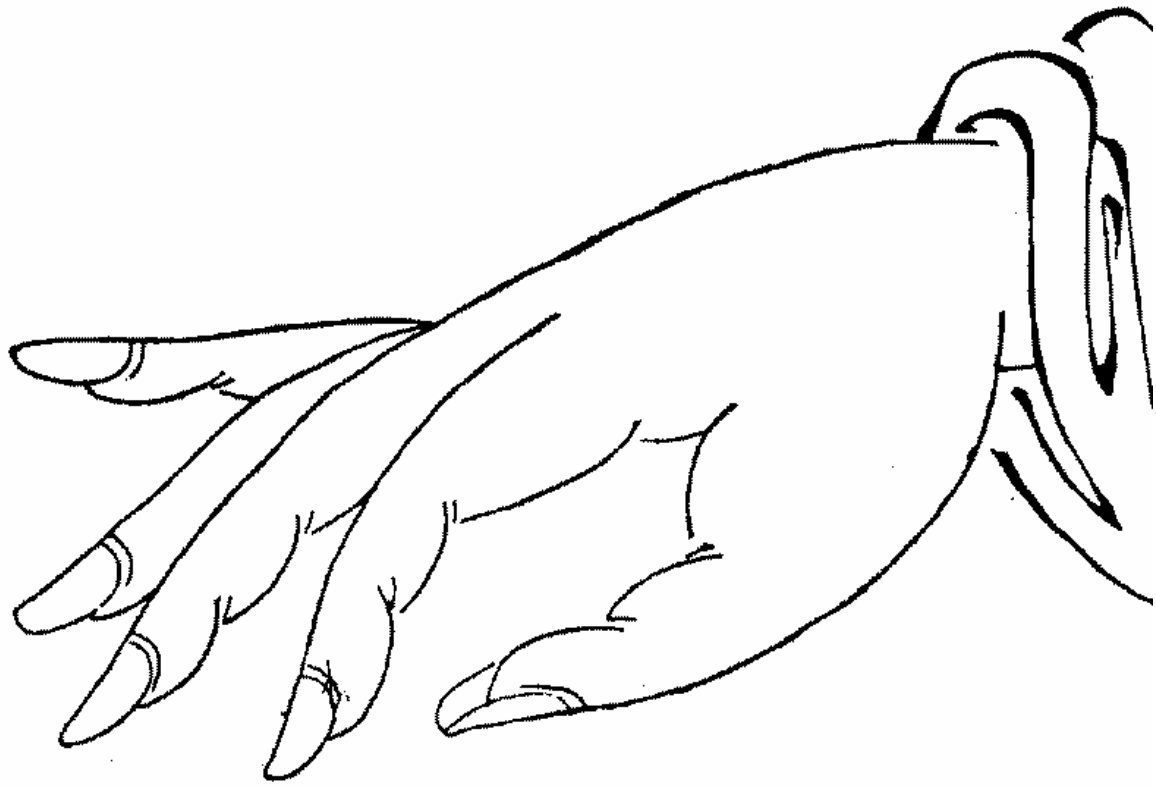
The Right-Hand Five Fingers – Palm Up

Translator's note: The author commonly uses a number of terms for parts of the hand for which we lack a precise English translation. One such term is hu-kou (lit. "tiger mouth" 虎口) which refers to the area where the thumb meets the index finger. We will For the most part that term will be translated by simply saying "the area where the thumb and index finger meet" or the equivalent. Terms referring to finger parts also exist that are somewhat problematic. Each finger can be said to have three joints, which in Chinese proceeding from the hand to the tip of the finger are: xiang-jie (lit. "chief joint" 相節), zhong-jie (lit. "middle joint" 中節), and mo-jie (lit. "last joint" 末節). In English we will call these the inner, middle, and outer (or last) joints where outer/last means away from the hand, and inner means at the hand. The inner joint is really more or less the knuckle of the finger. Also note that the thumb is considered a finger in China. The text also refers to the "fingerprint", where in English we would say finger pad.



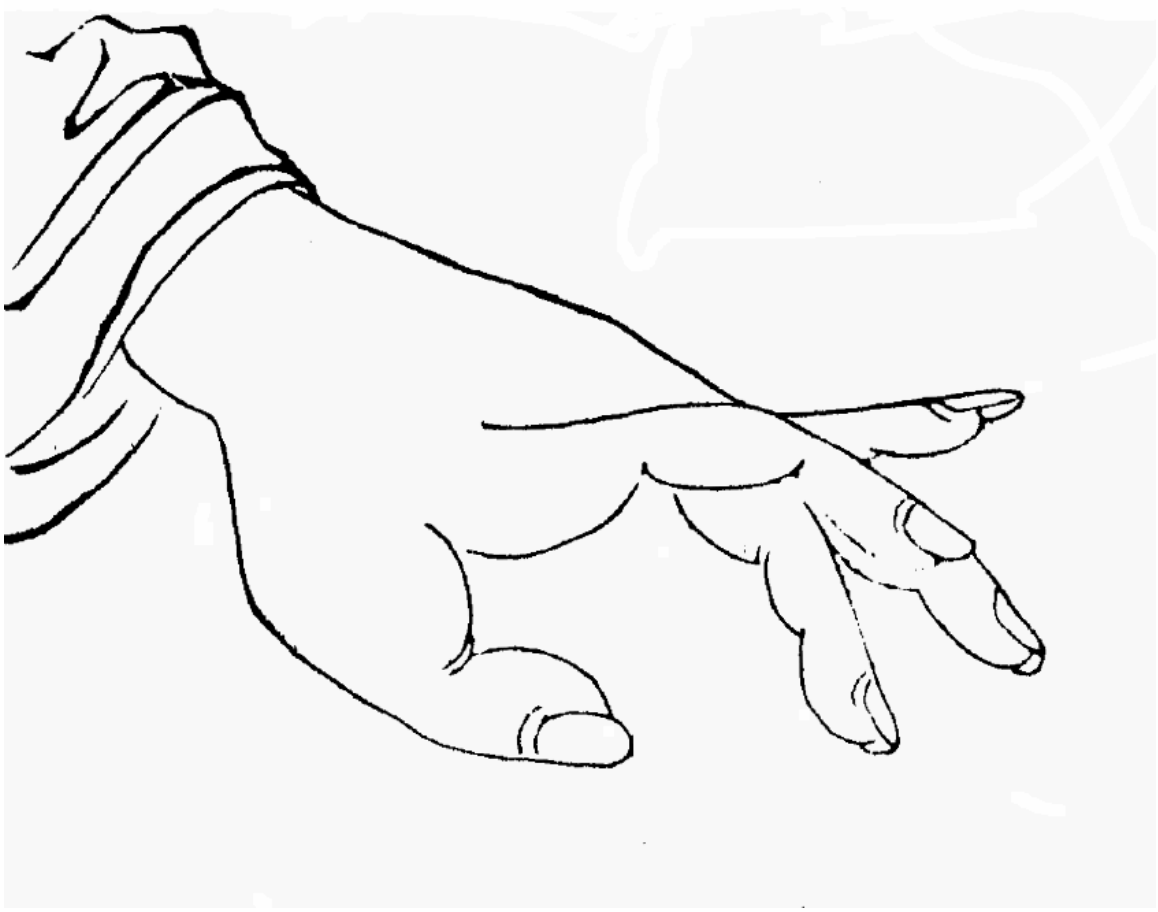
Left-Hand Five Fingers – Palm Down

The hands proceed from the shoulder to the upper arm, to the elbow, forearm, wrist, and palm. The palm leads to the fingers. Each finger has three joints – although the lower joint for the thumb is between the wrist and palm and is hidden and not exposed, only branching off at the middle joint. The "tiger mouth" (虎口) is where (the thumb) meets the index finger. Then we have the index finger, middle finger, and ring finger. The smallest finger is the little finger. It is forbidden to use it, thus it may be called the "forbidden finger" (禁指). At the last joint of all fingers, on the outside we have a fingernail and on the inside (of the finger), flesh. The flesh has a pattern called the fingerprint. The fingernails are found at the tips of the fingers. In this way, the fingers (and joints) are all the same. However there are differences in the left hand that presses (strings) and the right hand that plays (strings). Proceeding from the aspect of the hands including how they extend out, bend in, straighten out, incline to the side, bow down, or point up – one by one we give a detailed illustrated explanation. A scholar who can learn in detail and quietly understand (these techniques) can naturally obtain hands that physically respond to the mind's will.



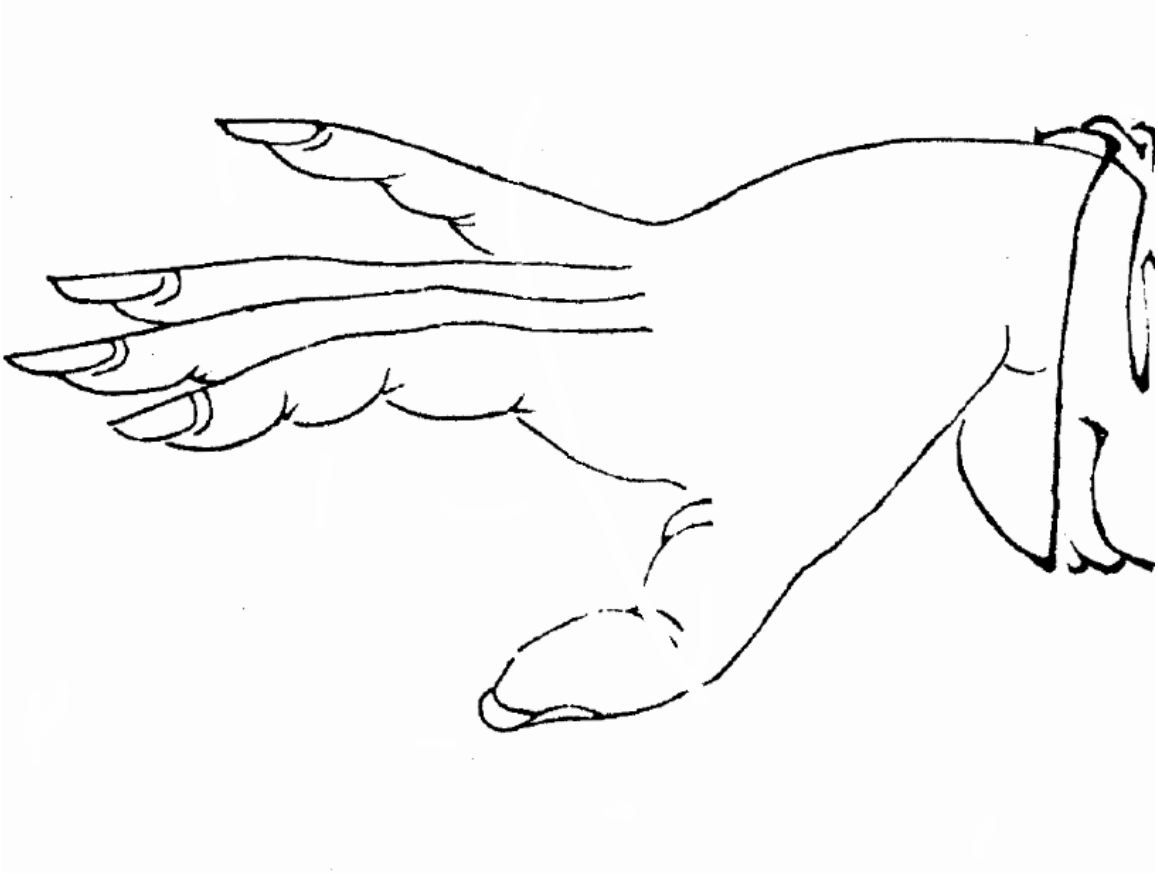
The Appearance of the Right Hand As It Begins To Play

Of the five fingers of the right hand, only the little finger is not used. Straighten the outer two joints, with the fingernail (of the little finger) pointing up. The middle and ring finger should be held out straight with the middle joints close together. The outer joint of the ring finger should be slightly higher when compared to the middle finger. Both should bend down about the same amount. The index finger should bend down with its outer two joints and fingernail hanging down. The thumb should be under the index finger with its two joints forming a slight bow. However much the fingers stick out or bend or are raised up or down, do not let the fingers separate too much. It is best if the space between the thumb and ring finger is open.



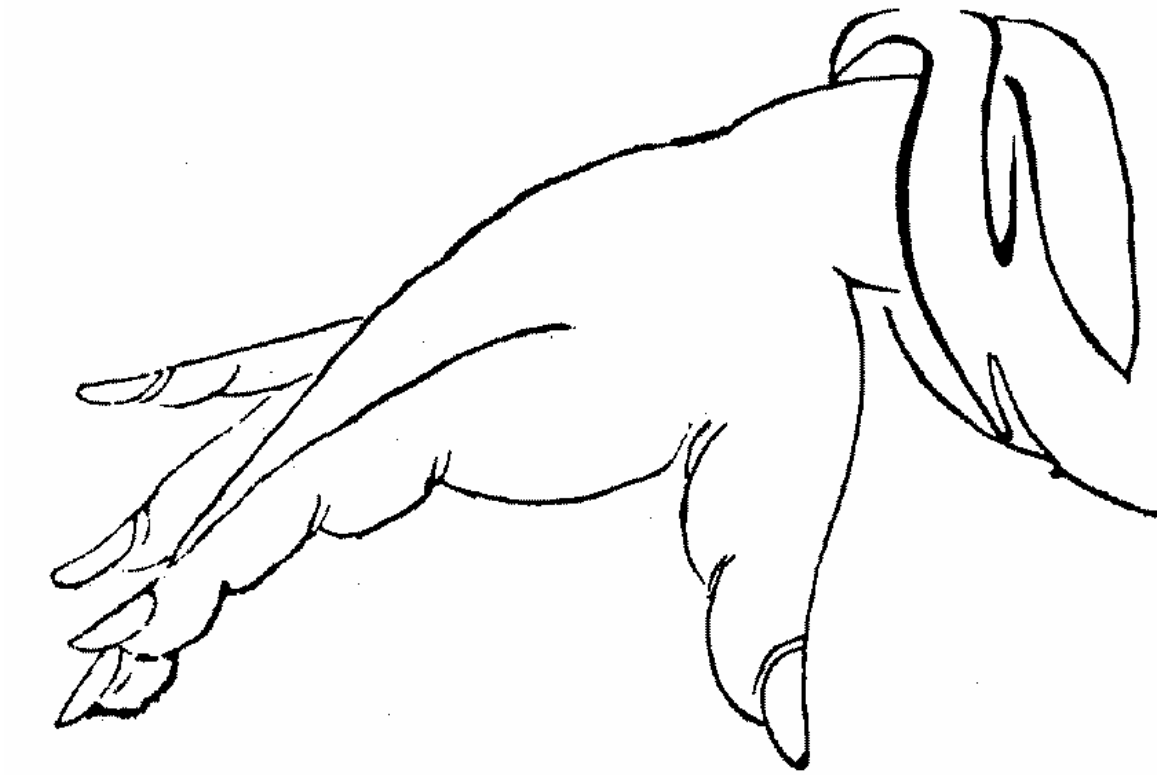
The Appearance of the Left Hand As It Begins To Play

Of the five fingers of the left-hand, only the little finger is not used. As previously shown, the outert two joints of the index finger are slightly bent as with a crescent moon. The outer two joints of the thumb extend out. The space between the thumb and the index finger is slightly open and (the thumb) is inclined to the side. The middle finger is straight but lower than the index finger (and in this case) lightly presses beyond the ninth hui on a string. The ring finger is also straight, but higher than the middle finger. Regarding the appearance of all the fingers one should exercise care and not use them in any careless manner. The fingernails should not be too long. Get rid of any sharp points so that you can firmly press the strings down, and avoid harming the surface of the qin.



The Appearance of the Right-Hand Thumb Playing Pi (擘)

The thumb is turned down and is perpendicular. The outer two joints are slightly bent. Motion comes from the strength in both wrist and the middle (thumb) joint. The ring, middle, and index fingers are held straight with their middle joints close together and the last joints uneven. The little finger is held as previously mentioned.



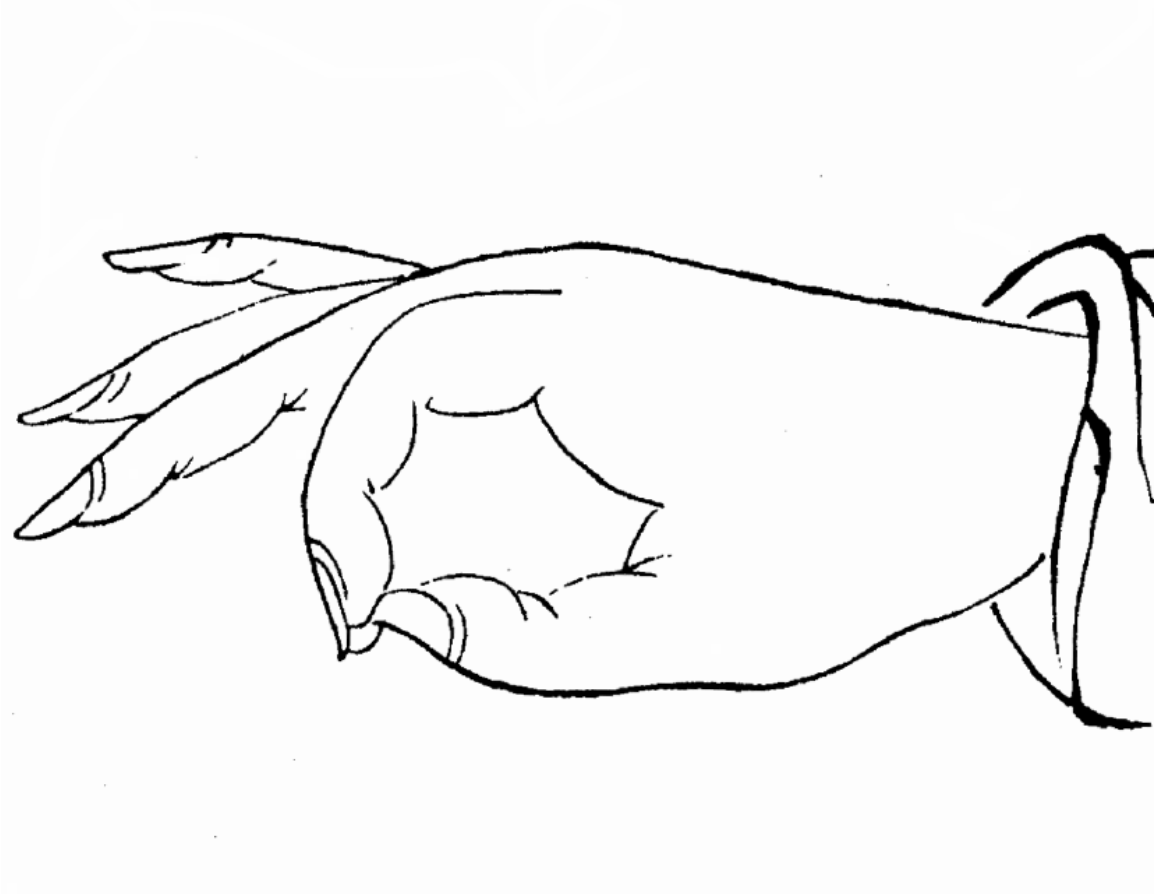
The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Tuo (托)

The right-hand thumb is held down and perpendicular. The last two joints are straight out. Motion come from the force exerted by the middle joint and the wrist. The index, middle, and ring fingers are straight, although the last two joints on the middle finger should be slightly below the other two fingers. There should be some space between the three fingers. The little finger should be held as before.

The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Mo (抹)

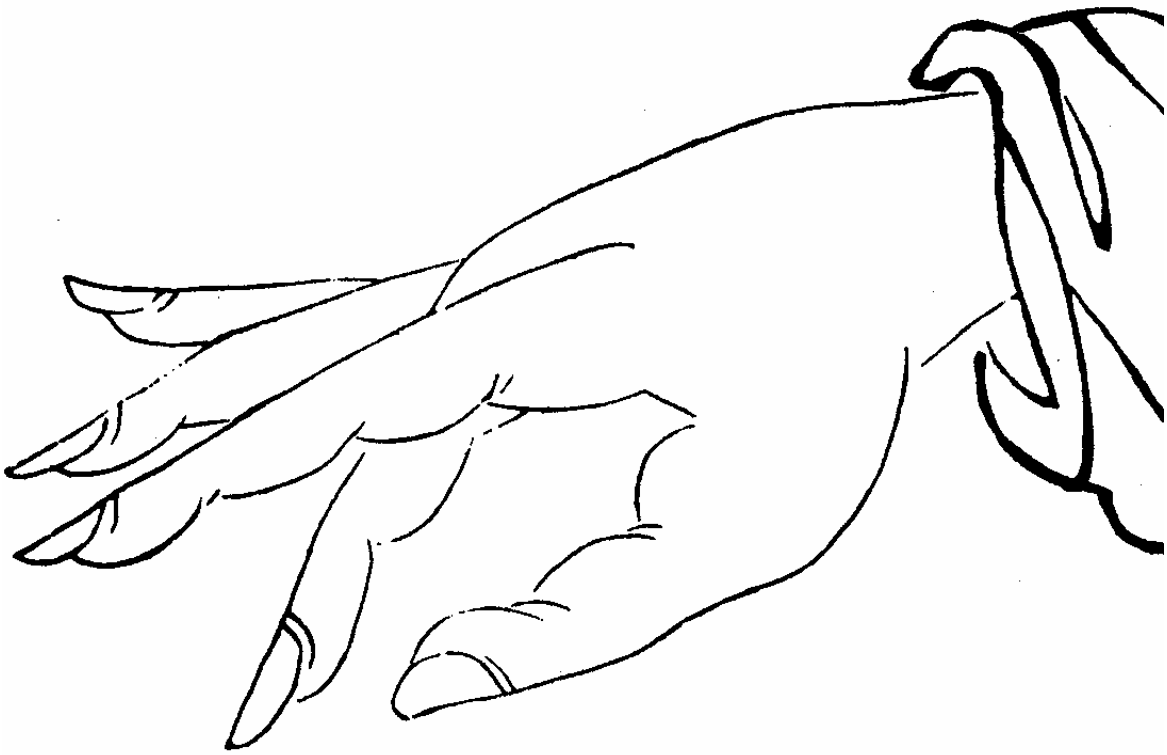
Bend the index finger slightly and extend it out using the last two joints. The last two joints of the thumb should be slightly bent and incline to the side of the index finger. Every time mo is played, make sure that the finger pad of the index finger falls beneath the fingernail of the thumb. Do not rest it on some inner string. Motion should originate from the outer two joints of the index finger. The middle and index fingers bend a little but are mostly straight. There should be a little separation between the fingers. The relative height of the fingers is uneven. The little finger is as before. The appearance of this technique is similar to the fu (沸) technique, only fu's motion comes from the wrist and forearm.[1]

[1] See Volume 4, Chapter 4, *Dictionary of Right-Hand Symbols* for more information on fu.



The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Tiao (挑)

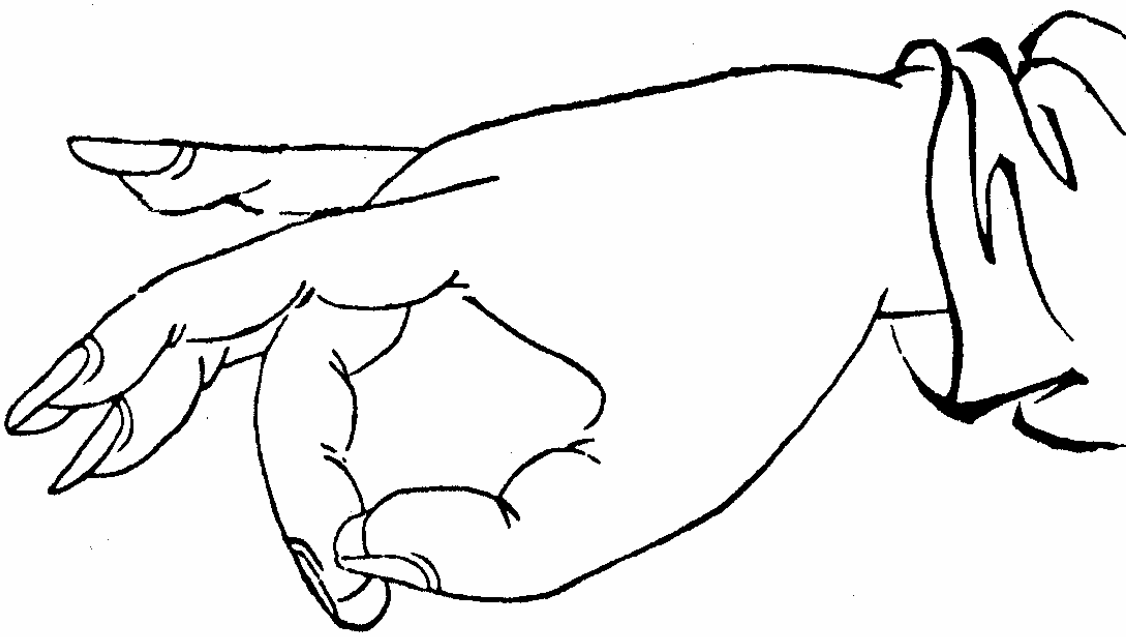
The index finger and the thumb make a circular shape. The thumb of the fingernail should be under the index finger and in the center of the finger pad area. When tiao is played, then the thumb should be stuck out. The (index) finger moves out. Its motion derives from the thumb's outer two joints moving out in a lively fashion. The middle and ring fingers are slightly bent. Other details are similar to the mo (抹) technique. The little finger should be held as before.



The Appearance of the Right Hand Middle Finger Playing Gou (句)

The middle finger bends down from the bottom joint. The outer two joints are held straight. The thumb is as in previous examples, inclined and under the middle finger. When gou is played, the last joint of the middle finger must fall past and under the fingernail of the thumb. It should not strike the next string.[2] Motion comes from force exerted from the middle joint of the middle finger. The index and ring fingers are straight and extended in a similar way and are also higher than the middle finger. The little finger is (held) as in previous (examples).

[2] Not all qin players would agree. This is probably a matter of taste and technique. In classical guitar, one has "rest stroke" which basically means "striking through" the string, and coming to rest on the next string. This produces a rather forceful sound – some qin players do the same. Gou and mo thus might have two forms – a weaker stroke that does not silence the next string towards the player, and a stronger stroke that does. Consult your teacher if you have a qin teacher, else use your own judgment based on your own musical expression and the context of the music itself.

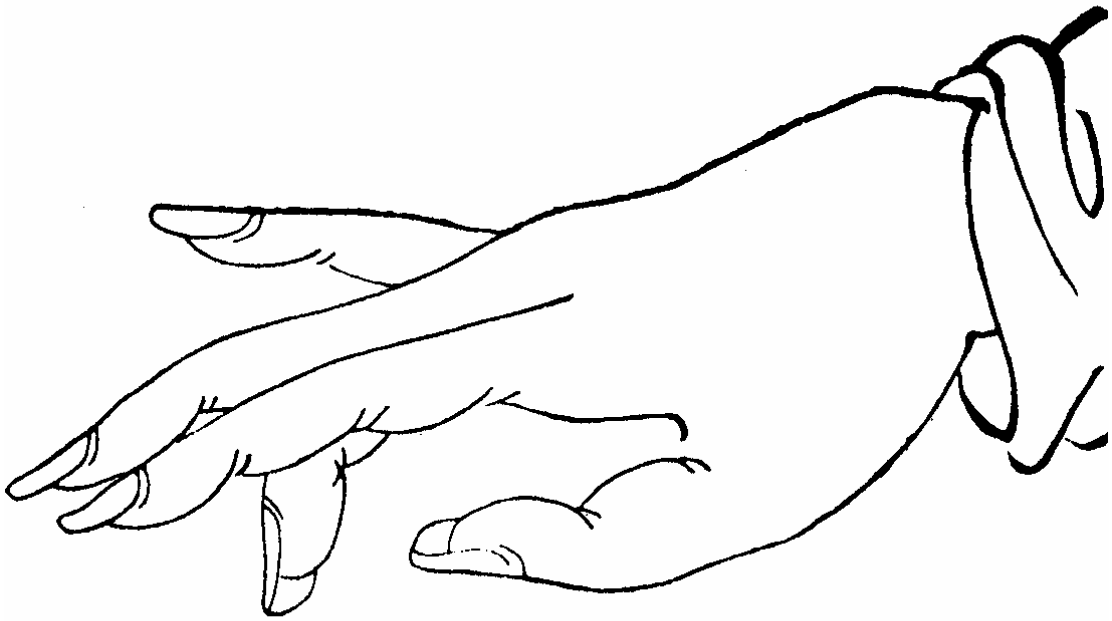


The Appearance of the Right-Hand Middle Finger Playing Ti (剔)

The middle finger and the thumb make a circle. The thumbnail is lower than the middle finger's finger pad area. The motion is similar to the tiao (挑) technique. The index and ring fingers are slightly bent and higher than the middle finger. The little finger is held as shown previously.

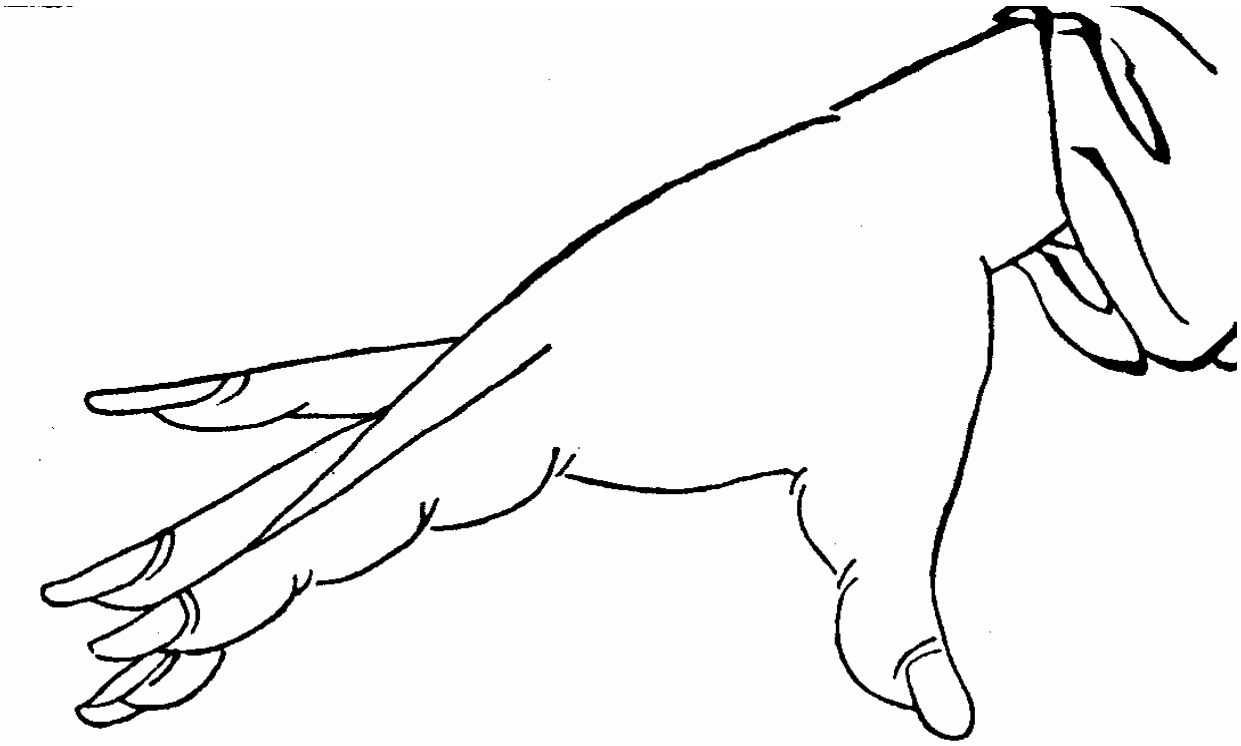
The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Da (打)

The ring finger bends down from the inner joint. Its outer two joints are straight. Motion comes from the force exerted by the inner joint (at the hand). The index and middle fingers are closely joined together and straight. They are also higher than the ring finger. The space between the thumb and index finger should be open with the thumb joints making a shape like the Chinese character for eight (八). The little finger is held as before.



The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Zhai (摘)

The ring finger bends down from the joint at the hand and the middle joint. The outer joint (and finger part) is held in a perpendicular manner. This (technique) is similar to ti (剔). Only there is no use of the thumb underneath it. As for motion, the force comes from both the inner and outer joints. The ring and middle fingers should be close together and slightly bent down. The thumb should be slightly bent over to the center with a little space between it and the index finger. The little finger is as before. The gun (滾) technique has a similar appearance, only the force of the motion comes from the wrist and upper arm.



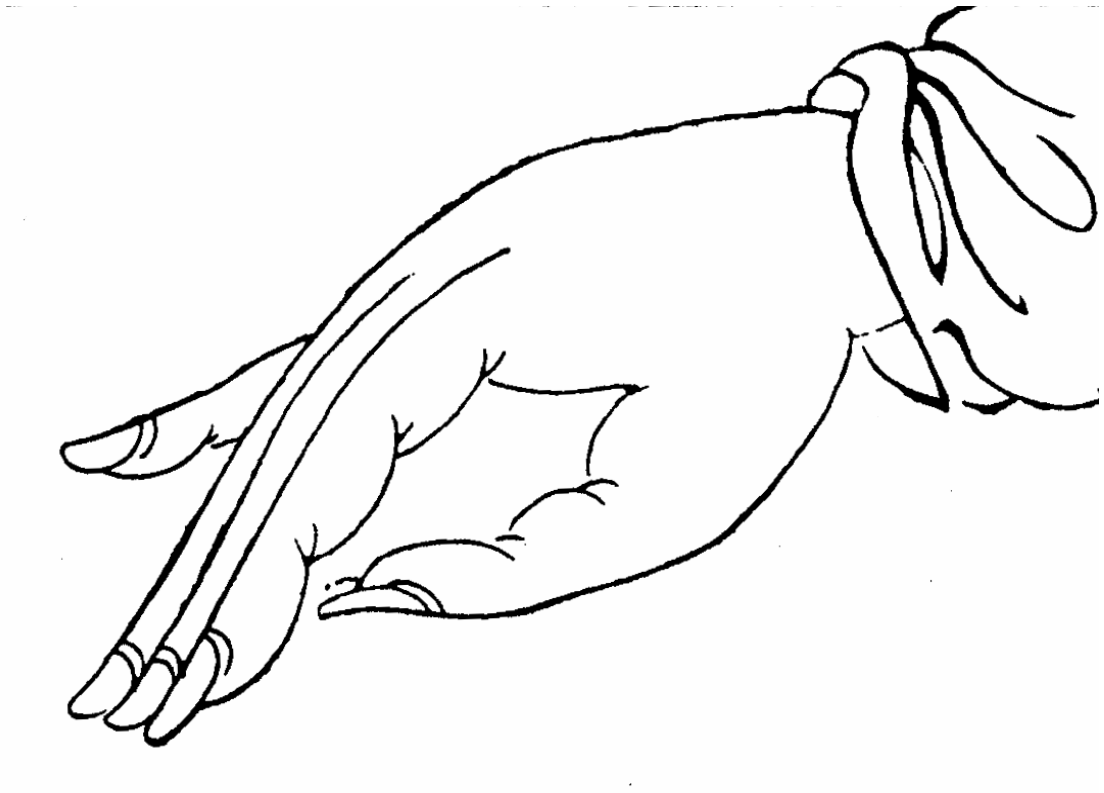
The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Cuo (撮) with Thumb and Middle Finger

The thumb and middle finger each stick out straight and open into the shape of the Chinese character for eight (八). The force for motion comes from the two inner joints (of the two fingers). The index and ring fingers stick out as a pair and are higher than the middle finger. The little finger is held as before.

The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Cuo (撮)[3] with Ring and Middle Fingers

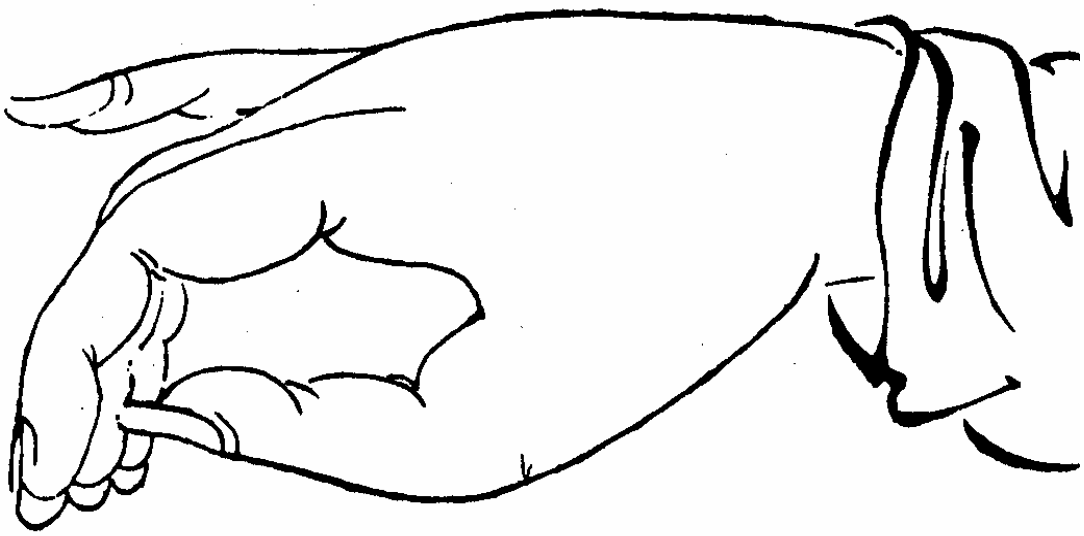
The middle and index finger hang down vertically with the outer two joints straight and the fingers separated in the form of the Chinese character for people (人). The thumb also hangs down and is slightly bent in the outer two joints. The (thumb's) fingernail edge is placed under the finger pad of the index finger. The motion (for this technique) comes from force exerted by all three fingers, index, middle, and ring finger using the joint at the hand in each case. The ring finger is extended and bent down a little. All three fingers are separated from each other and in form resemble a three pronged fork. The little finger is as before.

[3] This is the "small" cuo. See Volume 4, Chapter 4 for more information.



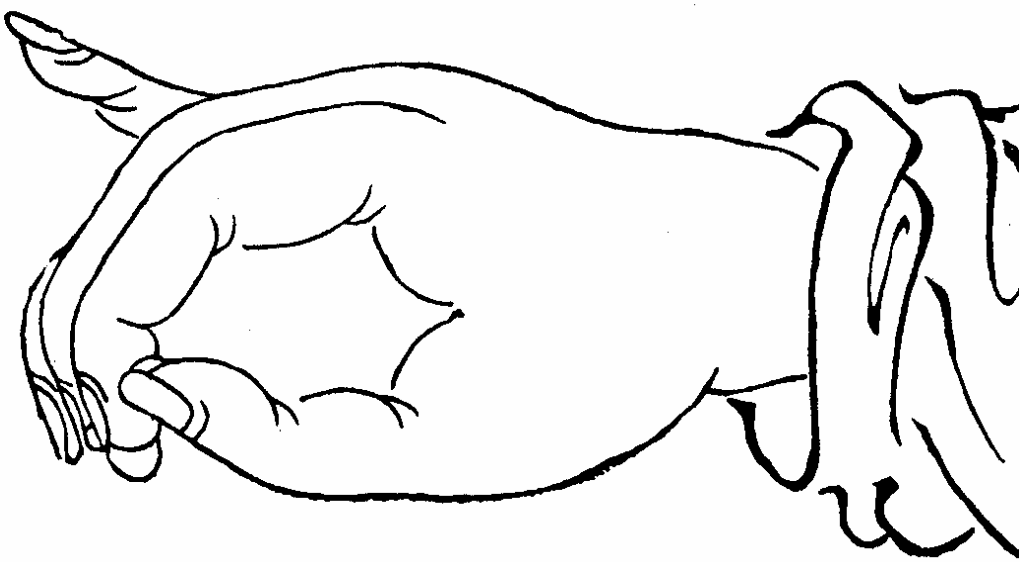
The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Po (潑)

The three fingers, index, middle, and ring finger should be held closely together and bent down from the inner joint. The outer two joints are extended in a straight manner. Make the fingernail of the ring finger stick out a little more than the fingernail of the middle finger. Make the middle fingernail stick out a little more than the fingernail of the index finger. Motion is exerted from the wrist. The thumb is is straight and inclined a bit underneath the side of the index finger. The little finger is held as before.



The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Ci (刺)

All three fingers, index, middle and ring finger are held closely together. Each is bent a little in the last two joints. The fingernail of the index finger should extend slightly beyond the middle finger's nail. The fingernail of the middle finger should also extend beyond the nail of the ring finger. When ci is played all three fingers should line up and extend straight out together. Motion derives from force exerted by the wrist. The thumb and little finger are held the same as in the previous example.

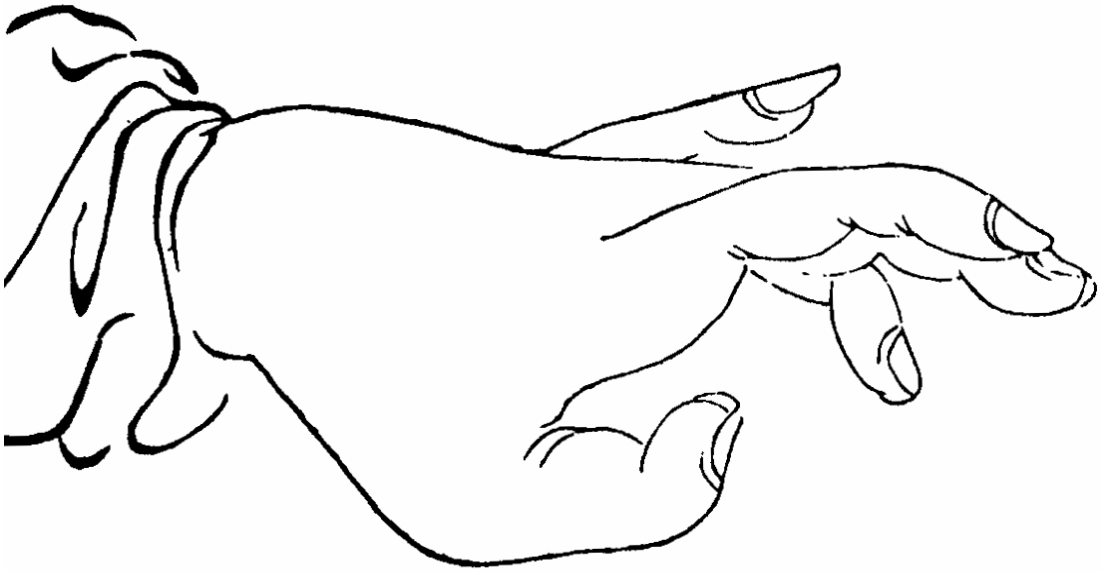


The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Lun (輪)

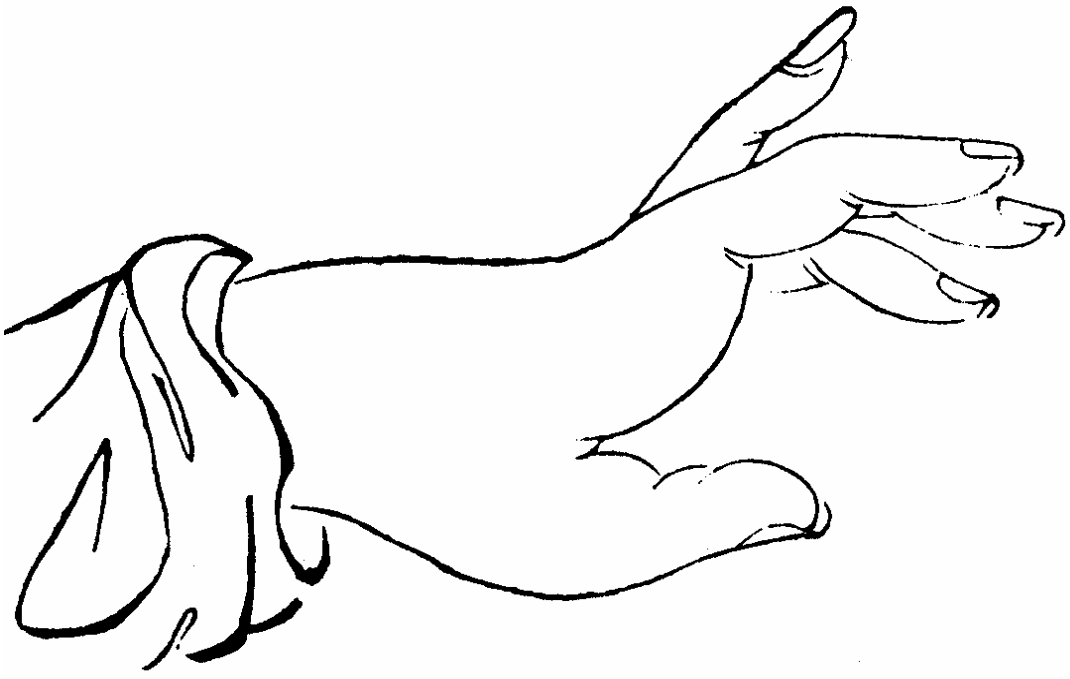
The three fingers, index, middle and ring finger are held closely together. Fingernails should be lined up and the fingers should be bent from the inner joint at the wrist. Motion comes from the last two joints of the fingers. The last two joints of the thumb are slightly bent – take the finger nail and put it behind and to the side of the finger pad of the index finger. The little finger is held as before. The ban-lun (半輪) technique uses the same methodology. Only the index finger does not play.

The Appearance of the Right-Hand Playing Fu (伏)

The technique here is similar to ci (刺). Start to play ci, using the three fingers, index, middle, and ring finger all close together. Include the thumb and line it up evenly with the other fingers. Strike the surface of the qin in the area of the first two strings. The sound should be like the tearing of silk. The little finger is held as in previous examples.



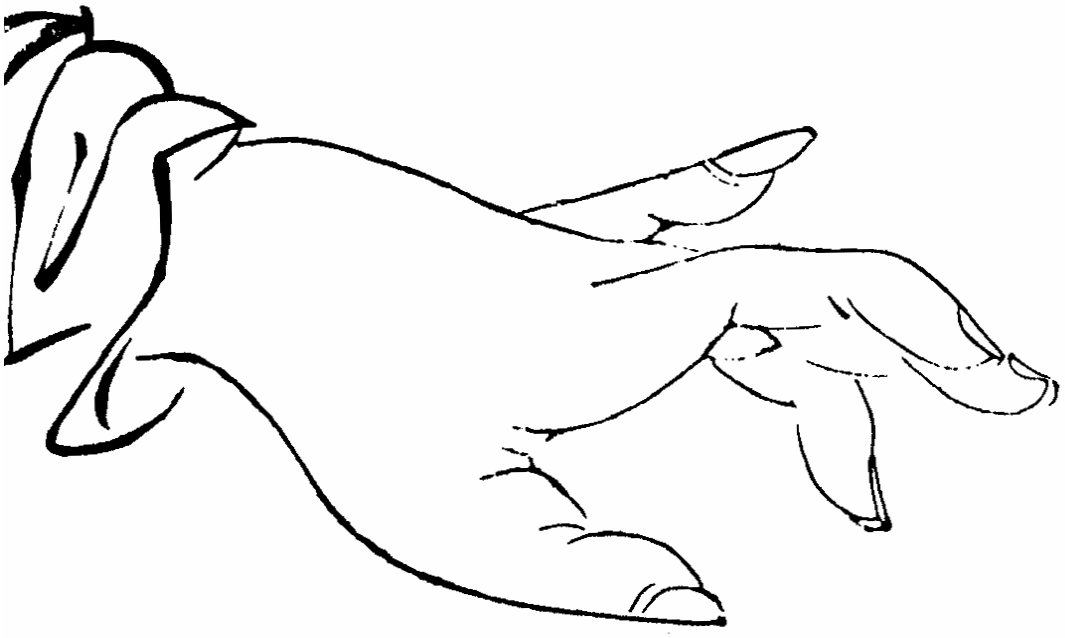
The Appearance of the Left-Hand Thumbnail Playing a String



The Appearance of the Left-Hand Thumb Using the Flesh to Play a String

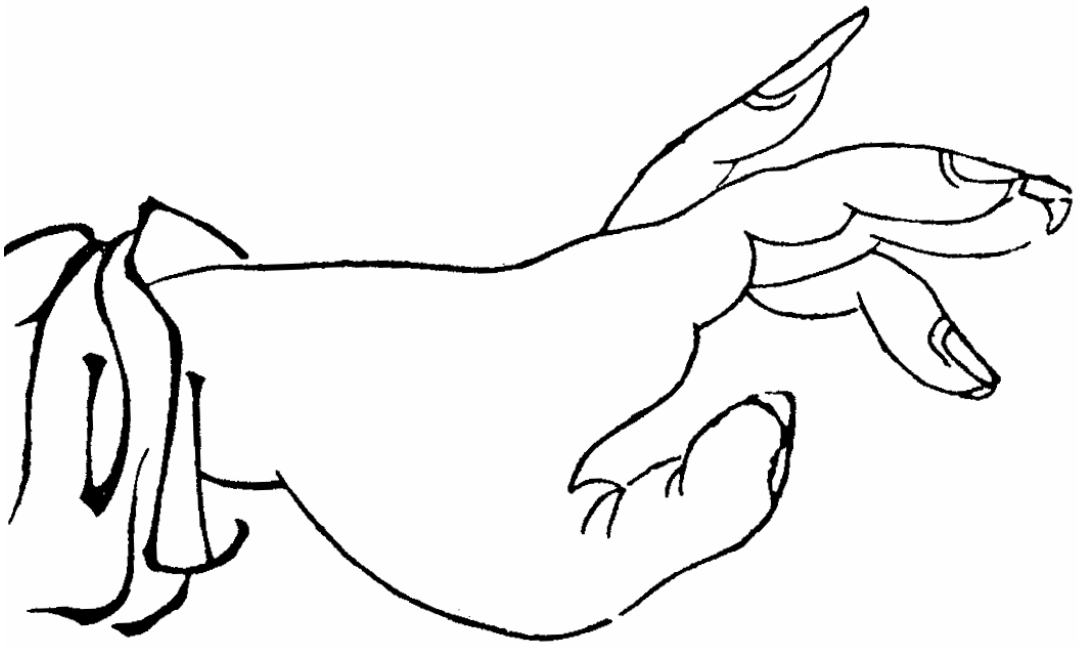
The thumb is at the side and beneath the index finger. The space between the thumb and index finger is half open. When playing a string (with the thumb) half nail and half flesh is used. The last two joints of the thumb are bent and employ the border between the nail and flesh on the right side presses the string. Do not use only the nail. If using only the flesh, then stretch the thumb out straight and use the bony part of the thumb on the last joint that protrudes to press the string. Facility in motion entirely comes from the outer two joints of the thumb, which should stretch and bend in a lively fashion. When well practiced, a thumb can easily manage two strings. The zhu (注) and chuo (綽) techniques [w*ith zhu use all flesh, and with chuo use half nail and half flesh]* become very convenient.[4] The index and middle fingers should be close together and slightly bent. The finger nails need not line up. The middle and ring fingers should be slightly apart. The ring finger should be slightly bowed and bent down. The little finger appears as in previous examples. Do not under any circumstances pinch the index finger and thumb together to make a circular shape – this is vulgar.

[4] It is not very clear here whether the author is talking about playing zhu with the thumb on one string or with the thumb on two strings. The latter case does exist and is used where one might play zhu first, and then some other technique (say moving back up) next, or where one is playing a number of strings at the same hui position "at one time". The translator does not find it very easy to play zhu on one string with all flesh and no nail. However, if playing zhu and pressing down two strings, then one might use all flesh.



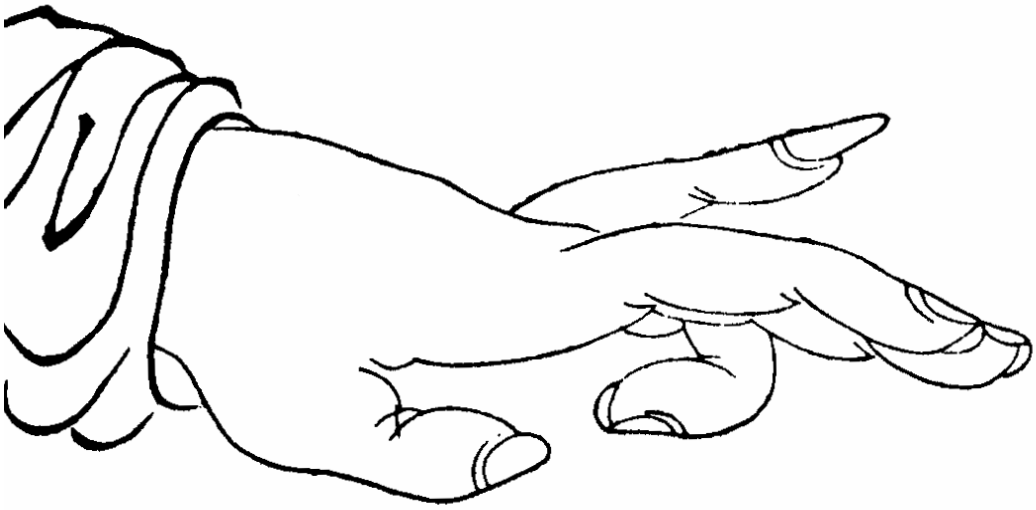
The Appearance of the Left-Hand Ring Finger Pressing a String

The index finger bends from the middle joint and should make a convex shape including the outer last joint. It should not be bent in a concave manner. Press at the center of the finger pad. If you are playing two or three strings, then extend it in a straight way and slightly incline it to the left. Strength comes from the outer two joints. Motion stems from the lively movement of the wrist and upper arm. Do not lay the middle finger on top of the index finger – this is vulgar. All the other fingers are the same as in previous examples.



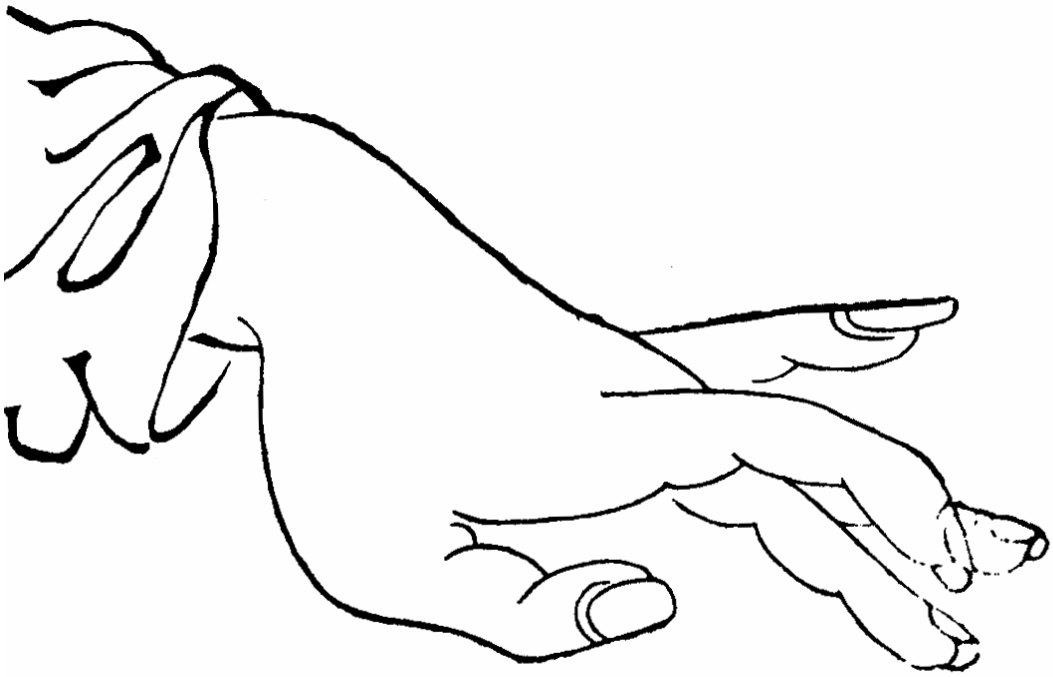
The Appearance of the Left-Hand Thumb Playing Tao (掐) and the Ring Finger Pressing a String

The ring finger presses a string as in the previous (illustration). The thumb bends at the outer two joints. Using the right side of the thumbnail above the pressed position of the ring finger, lightly pluck out a sound from the string. Facility here stems from making sure the ring finger is solidly positioned. Thus when the thumb plucks a string the result is naturally clear and bright. One must take advantage of the moment when the ring finger is placed on the string and pluck. If you wait (too long) for the placement (of the ring finger) and then pluck, then the result may be too late. The rest of the fingers are the same as in previous examples.



The Appearance of the Left-Hand Playing Gui (跪)

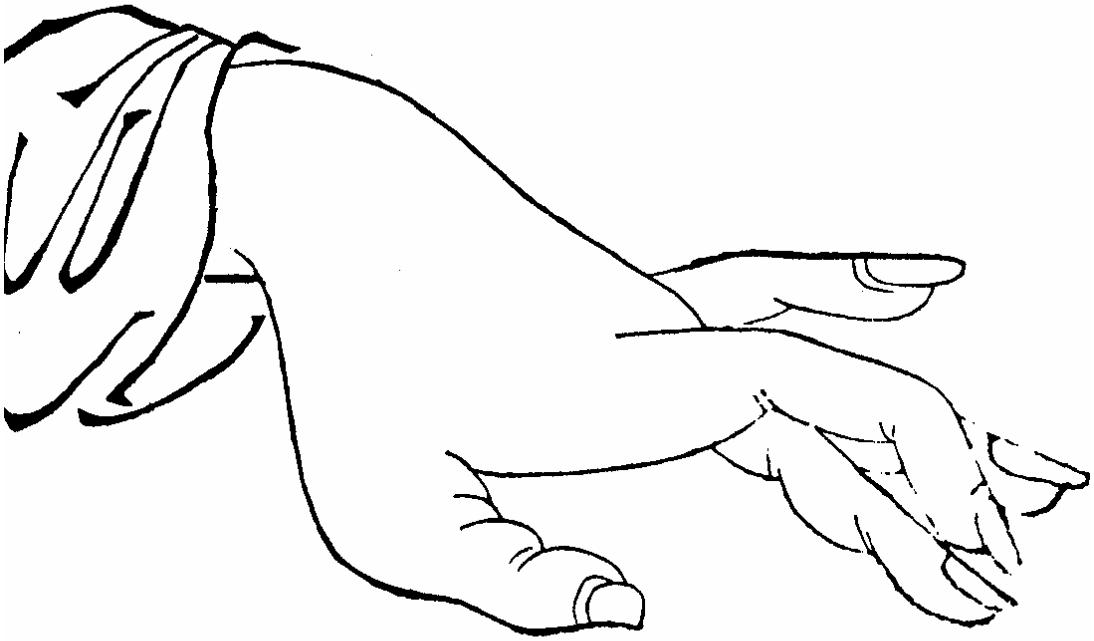
The index finger bends at the middle joint and kneels with the outer part of the digit. When pressing (the string) there are two uses with fingernail and flesh. When using the nail, then press in the center of the nail. When using the flesh then press more closely to the last joint. When you start to use this technique, it can be somewhat painful. After long practice the pain will not be felt. It is best to employ both nail and flesh to jointly press two strings. If one employs gui and then does tao (掐), one should lean (the finger) to the left side. Facility will come with practice. The other fingers are the same as when one uses the index finger to play a string.



The Appearance of the Left-Hand Middle Finger Playing a String

The middle finger bends from the lower joint at the wrist. The outer two joints extend straight. Use the center of the finger pad to touch the string. If two strings are pressed at one time then slightly favor the left side. In both cases use the middle joint.[5] The index and ring finger are extended straight out. The thumb is at the side. The little finger is treated as in previous examples.

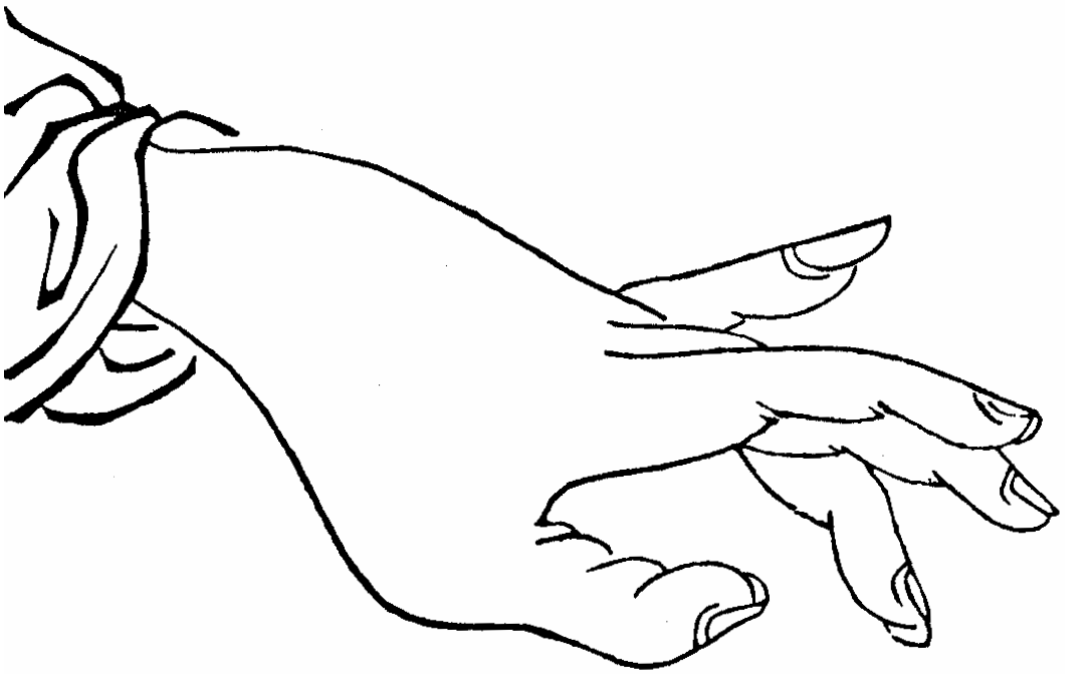
[5] This sentence makes no sense to me. Perhaps he meant to say that if you flatten the final outer part of the finger you can cover two strings? Or he is simply too terse and is saying that the middle joint is involved somehow.



The Appearance of the Thumb and Middle Finger Playing Together

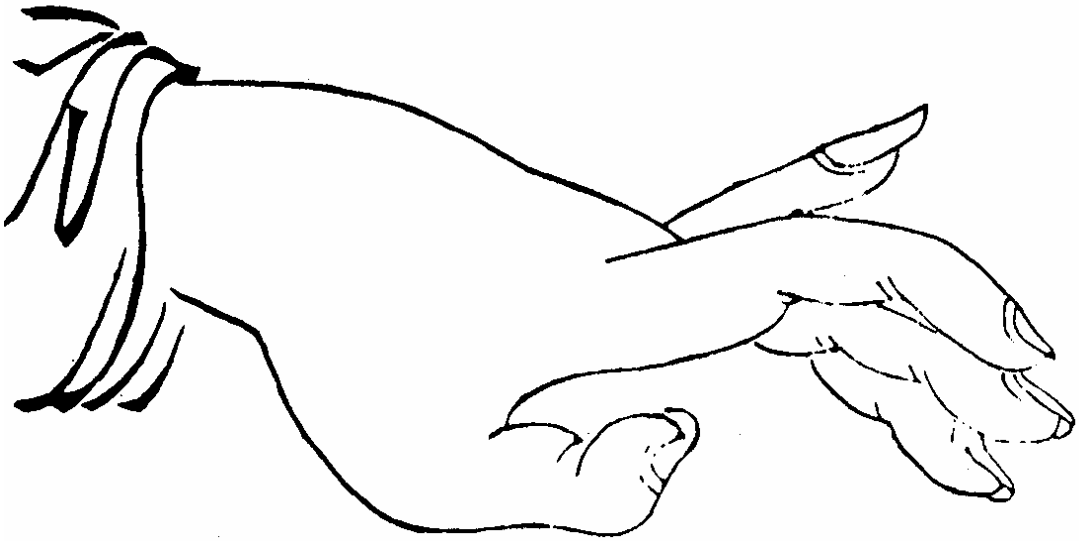
The thumb bends in the last two joints and uses half nail and half flesh to play on an interior string.[6] The middle finger sticks out straight with its last two joints and uses the center of the finger pad to play an exterior string. This technique is often used to play string pairs seven and two, or one and six. It is also used when strings are far apart. The index and ring fingers are held in a manner similar to the middle finger. The little finger is held as in previous examples.

[6] In this section and the next few sections, interior or inner means a string close to the player, and exterior or outer means a string farther away from the player.



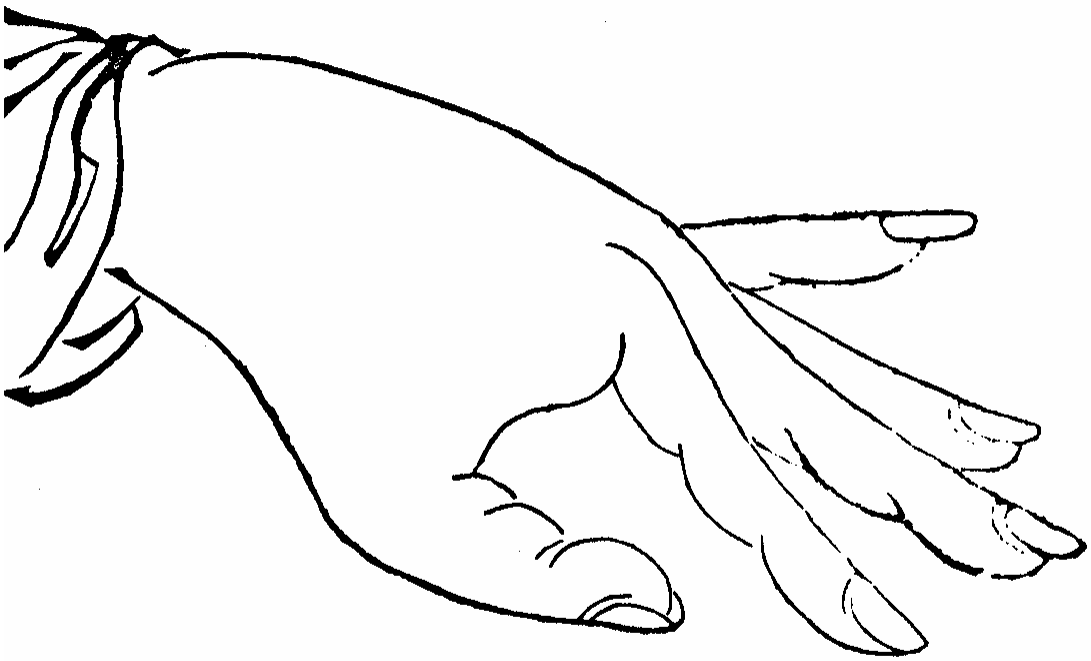
The Appearance of the Thumb and Ring Finger Playing Together

The thumb bends in the last two joints and uses half of the nail and half flesh to play on an interior string. The index finger bends from the middle joint with the last joint thrust out and plays an exterior string. Use the left side of the finger pad to press an exterior string. This technique is often used to play string pairs that are far apart. The index and middle fingers should be close together and slightly bent to the side. The little finger is held as in previous examples.



The Appearance of the Left-Hand Middle and Ring Fingers Playing Together

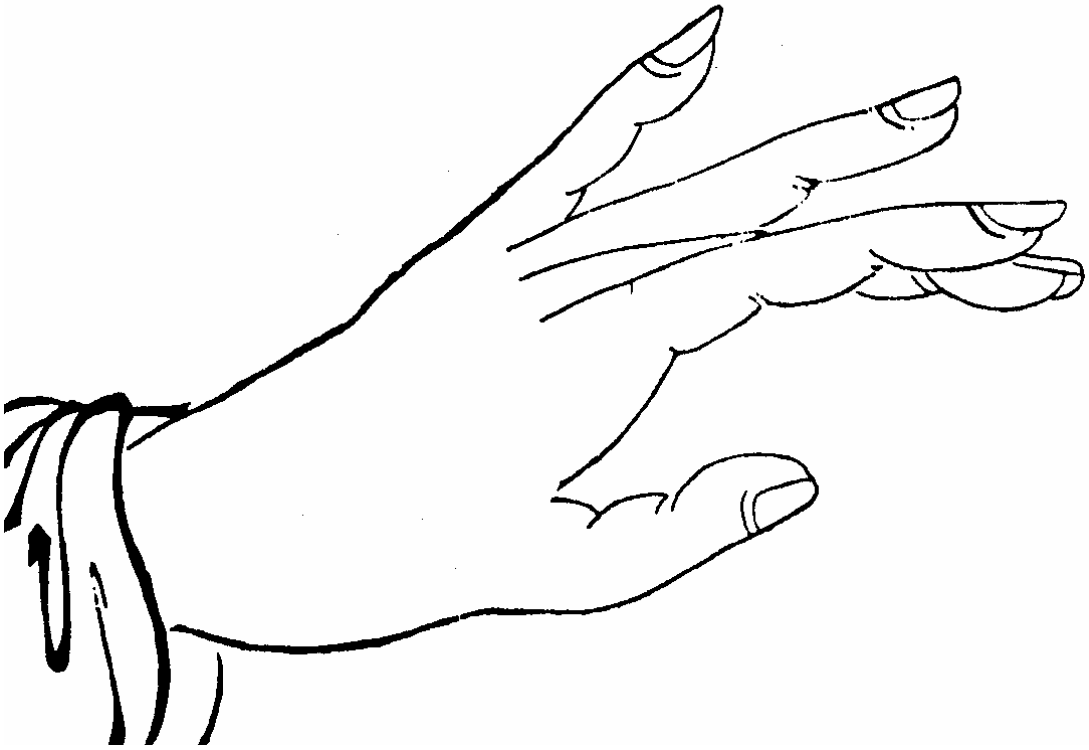
The middle finger sticks out straight from its last two digits. Use the left-side of the finger pad on an exterior string. The ring finger is bent at the middle joint with the outer joint straight. The left side of the finger pad is also used to press an interior string. This technique is often used when playing strings one and two. And it may also be used when the strings are near each other. The index finger is stretched out straight and is slightly to the side. The thumb is bent and at the side. The little finger is treated as in previous examples.



The Appearance of the Left-Hand Thumb and Index Finger Playing Together[7]

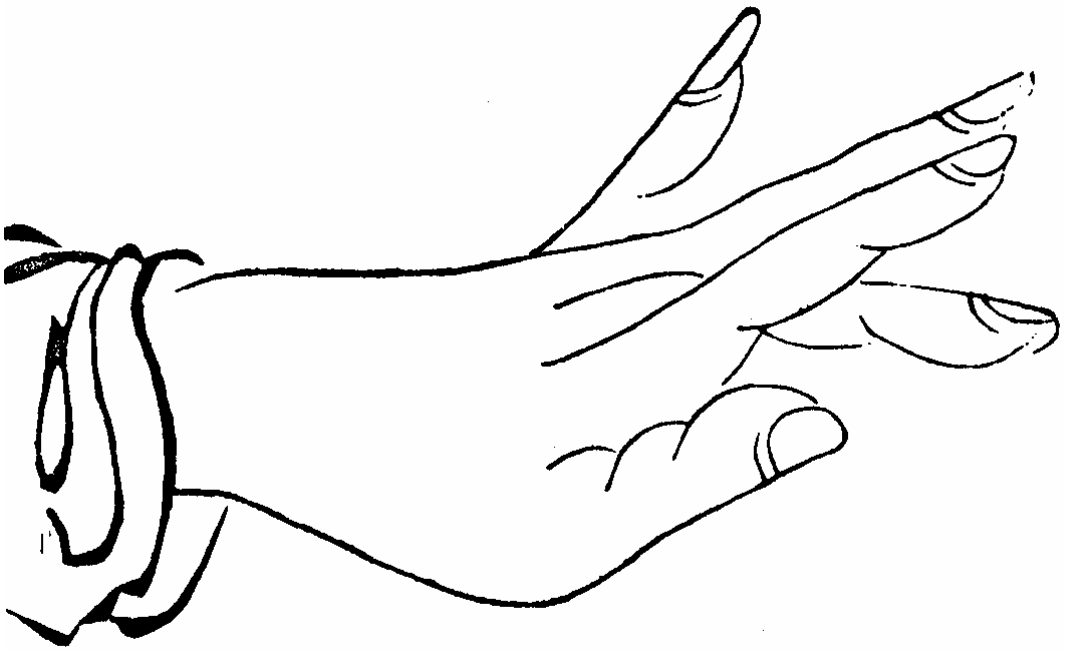
The thumb bends at its last two joints and employs half nail and half flesh (to press) an interior string. The index finger sticks out at the last two joints and uses the finger pad on the left side to press some outer string. This (technique) is often used with two adjoining strings. It is also used when the strings are near each other. The middle and ring fingers stick straight out and are slightly raised. Their height is uneven. The little finger is treated as before.

[7] This section can apply to using both index finger and thumb in a continuously played passage. For example, one might use it with da-yuan (打圓).



The Appearance of the Left-Hand Thumb Playing Harmonics

Extend the outer two joints of the thumb and lightly touch the string with the bony extruded part on the right side. Motion may come from the wrist or the joint at the hand. The middle finger is straight and slightly bent down. The index and ring fingers are straight and slightly bent up. The little finger is held as before.



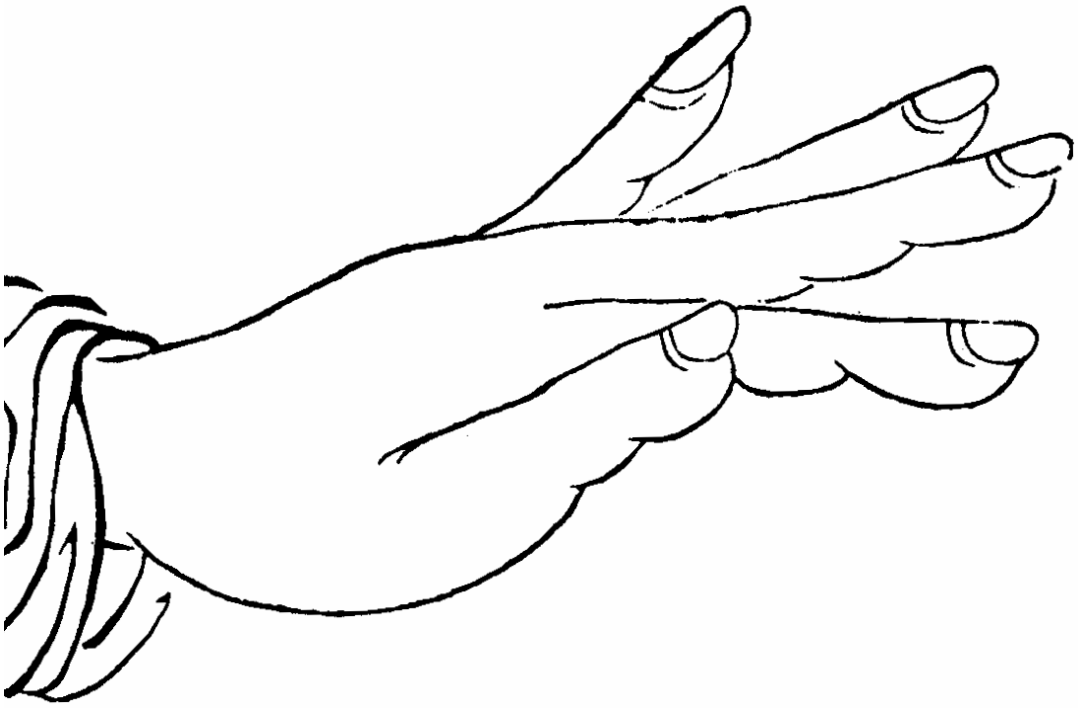
The Appearance of the Left-Hand Middle Finger Playing Harmonics

The outer two joints of the middle finger are extended straight out. Use the highest part of the finger pad and lightly touch the string. Motion comes from the lower joint at the hand. The technique for all other fingers is the same as for the middle finger pressing a string.[8]

[8] The author means the finger technique for the other fingers is the same when using the middle finger to play either a harmonic or a non-harmonic pressed note.

The Appearance of the Left-Hand Ring Finger Playing Harmonics

The last two joints of the ring finger are slightly curved and the finger is bent just a little bit towards the left side. There are two places on the finger that can be used for placement (on the string). One is at the left side of the finger pad. The other is at the intersection of the last two joints, which is often used with the suo-ling (索鈴) and li (歷) techniques. Motion (for the latter technique) is exerted from the wrist or (for the former technique) from the last joint of the (ring) finger. With both methods, the thumb, index, middle, and little fingers have the same appearance as with previous explanations for the middle and index fingers – only the finger used is different.



The Appearance of the Left-Hand Index Finger Playing Harmonics

Hold the last two joints of the index finger out straight. There are two places (on the finger) used in playing. One is at the center of the finger pad in its most prominent position. The other is at the intersection of the outermost and middle joint with the center used in both cases directed at the qin surface. Motion derives either from the wrist or from the last joint. In both cases the thumb sticks out straight with the fingernail slightly facing up. There is no open space between the thumb and index finger. The thumb and index finger are both straight. There is open space at the tips of the fingers and the fingers slightly face up. Use the illustration to determine the height. The little finger is held as before.